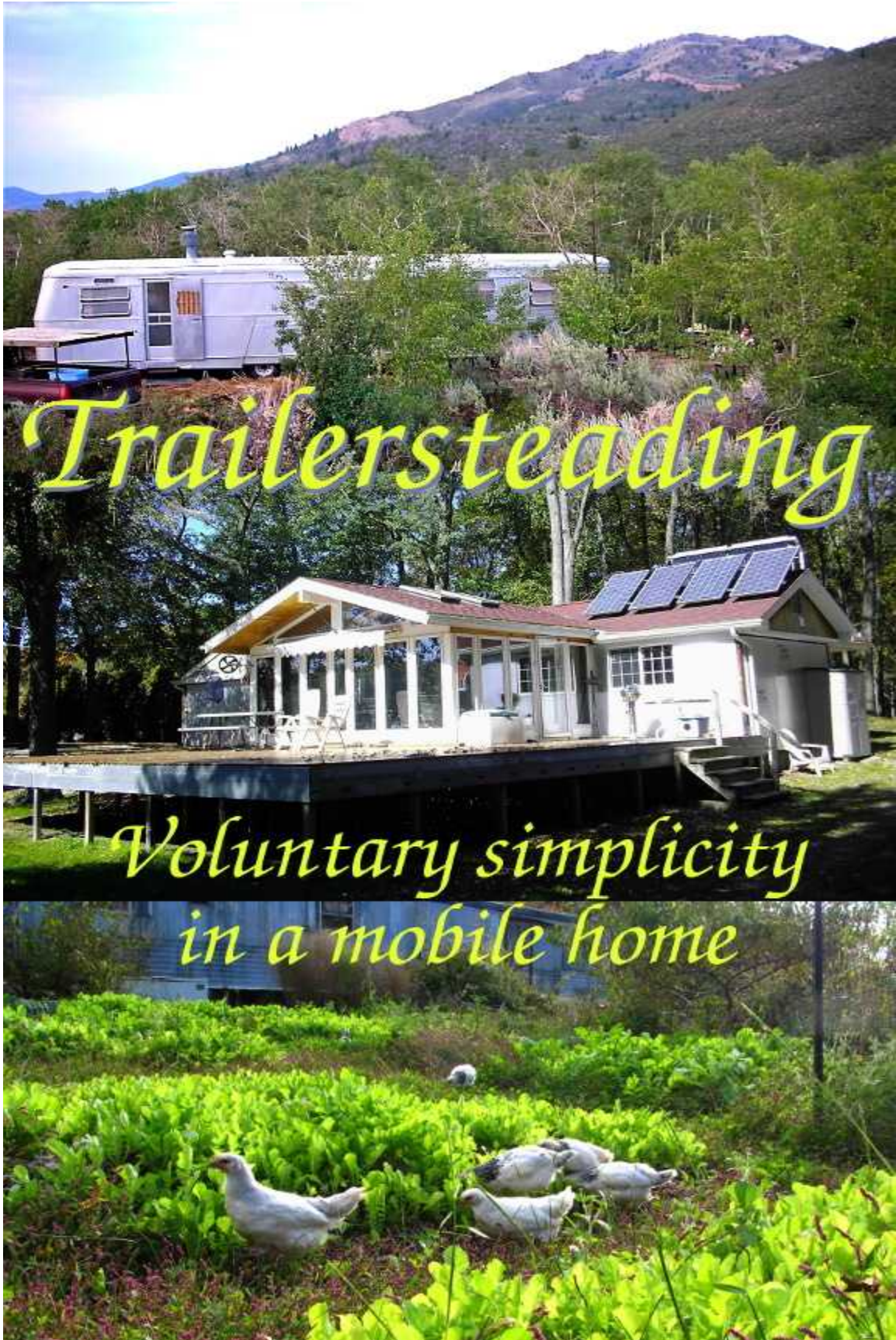


# *Trailersteading*

*Voluntary simplicity  
in a mobile home*



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# **Trailersteading: Voluntary Simplicity in a Mobile Home**

*Volume 2 in the Modern Simplicity series*

by Anna Hess

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# Introduction

## Why live in a trailer?



*Our trailer in fall 2012.*

"You should write about your biggest successes and failures as a homesteader," my father suggested during a recent phone call. My husband and I have spent the last six years learning to grow our own food and to make a living without a boss, but I had to smile because I knew the item at the top of my success list was also at the top of my father's failure list. Rather than building a beautiful house that could grace the pages of *Mother Earth News*, we opted to lower our housing costs to nearly \$0 by living in a free mobile home.

The average American family spends 20% of their income on housing, with

the median price tag for rent or mortgage being over \$16,000 per year. Many homesteaders-to-be go so far into debt building or buying their home that they're forced to put off their self-sufficiency goals until after retirement. Even folks who opt to build a "tiny house" (more on this term in the next chapter) generally spend years of their time on the project and end up with an albatross of a mortgage slung around their necks.



*Minimizing your housing expenses can be a way of paying off debt or saving for a large purchase.*

But there are cheaper housing options. A friend wanted to pay off his credit card debt, so he moved out of his apartment and lived in his car for a few

months. My brother resided in a converted chicken coop for years. And a visitor to my childhood farm simply pitched a tent in each new location he passed through.

*Overview of the initial startup costs and annual energy bills of the full-time trailer dwellers profiled in this book. (Use landscape view to see the full chart.)*

	<b>Square feet</b>	<b>Purchase price</b>	<b>Installation price</b>	<b>Initial renovations</b>	<b>Annual energy bills</b>
Anna & Mark, "Our mobile home adventures"	500	\$0	\$2,000	\$500	\$1,017
Wendy & Mikey, "Cheap and green"	1,200	\$1,000*	\$0	\$11,086Poverty-stricken . '	\$415
Jonathan & Andrea, "Trailer park to woodland paradise"	924	\$8,000	\$12,000	\$610	\$2,049
Sara & Seth, "Starter home for a young family"	960	\$15,000	\$7,000	\$0	\$840
David & Mary, "An incognito trailer"	840	\$15,773**	\$884**	\$0	\$1,690
Lindsey & Keith, "A crazy, cobbled-together, split-level mobile home"	1,680	\$7,500***	\$3,000	\$9,500	\$1,950



\* Trailer already in place on land, so I used the value estimated by the insurance company.

\*\* Adjusted for inflation to show equivalent 2012 dollars.

\*\*\*The first trailer came with the land and isn't included in these figures.

The truth is that simple housing doesn't have to be so extreme. Used mobile homes are a very low-cost housing option that allow you to improve your living situation a bit at a time when you have the cash, but the social stigma keeps many homesteaders from even considering the trailer option. And yet, if a trailer allows you to live without debt, to keep your ecological footprint to a minimum with energy bills at or below the national average, and even to blend right in with traditional house-dwellers after a few years, why not go for it?

## Case study: Our mobile home adventures

I dreamed of homesteading ever since my own back-to-the-land-dreaming parents threw in the towel and packed us off to town when I was in the third grade. And I have to admit that none of my fantasies included a trailer. I researched straw-bale houses, earthships, and cob. I drew floor plans and crunched the numbers on passive solar heating.



*The structures on my farm were in bad shape when I arrived.*

Meanwhile, I was saving my pennies to purchase as much land as possible. I ended up with 58 acres of swamp and hillside (and a couple of arable corners) in southwest Virginia. The land had a barn with huge holes in the roof and a hundred-year-old house that was falling down. In retrospect, I should have fixed up that house, sad as it was, but I had little experience with building and my father deemed it unsafe. So down it came and remove the wooden t they .

A year after buying my dream homestead, it was looking less and less like I'd ever live there. The farm had only cost \$600 per acre and I'd gotten most of that money as a no-interest loan from a friend, but I was still in debt. Using a very low-ball figure of \$20 per square foot for a traditional stick-built house (framed with small lumber like two by fours), a twenty-by-twenty-foot house would cost \$8,000 to put together, plus months of labor. Was my dream going to wash out without even a trial run?

As my hopes reached their lowest ebb, my husband-to-be, Mark, marched into my life. I had been raised by parents who adamantly argued they weren't ex-hippies, but who still managed to raise three kids below the poverty line while giving us a very middle class education—voluntary simplicity in action. Mark's parents, on the other hand, had pulled themselves up by their bootstraps so that they could provide new clothes and a nice house for their kids, but their heritage lay in hard-scrabble farming in eastern Kentucky and trailers were part of their culture. Mark's mother spent several years of her life in a mobile home (albeit the most beautiful one I've ever walked through), so Mark's mind was wide open to housing possibilities.

"Do you really want to get a full time job just to pay for building a house?" Mark asked. By this time, he was a member of my homesteading team and was quickly wiggling his way into my heart. I had lived in a tent for a year and found it little hardship, so it wasn't that I thought a trailer was beneath me. Honestly, I simply hadn't considered the option. But once Mark raised the question, I was quickly swayed by the idea of having a ready-made living situation that would let us move to the land right away and put our energy into creating a vibrant vegetable garden.



*Our windowless trailer in its original mobile home park.*

Our initial search for a trailer took us far afield. We hunted through classified ads, looking at trailers in the \$1,000 to \$2,000 range. The world was astonishingly full of trailers for sale—big ones, small ones, trailers reeking of cat piss, and fresh new trailers which seemed as fancy as any home I'd lived in.

Then reality struck. The price of the trailer wasn't the primary consideration—location was. We were going to have to hire a trailer-hauling company to transport our mobile home, and those companies charge by the mile, so the closer a find was to our land, the better. We stopped reading classified ads and started rolling down back roads near our farm. Within hours, we stumbled across a trailer park fifteen minutes away and asked its proprietor if he had a mobile home he was willing to sell for \$2,000 or less.

"You can have that one over there for free," he said, pointing to a 1960s model, windowless and empty at the edge of the park. "If you haul it off." And that's how we found our new home.





*A bulldozer allows a trained crew to move trailers into the most surprising locations.*

We were lucky that our free trailer was small—10 feet wide by 50 feet long. When we got the trailer-hauling crew to come look at our property, they said a larger trailer would have been impossible to pull to our house site. Even for our tiny trailer, we had to cut big openings in the forest at each curve in the driveway to give the trailer room to maneuver trailer

My father was never keen on the idea of his daughter living in a trailer, and though I have happily ignored most of his admonishments, I wish I'd followed his advice to absent myself from the farm on moving day. At a rate of hundreds of dollars per hour, I could see my small stash of backup cash slipping away with every hangup. As I watched our crew jack the trailer up so that it could roll across the creek, my heart was in my throat, and I gulped as a low-hanging branch ripped a hole in the tin wall. But, finally, the bulldozer yanked our new/old trailer into the spot we'd mowed for it between the blackberry brambles, carefully aligned with the long sides facing north and south for passive solar gain. Home!



*We closed our trailer in with double-glazed windows.*

Over the next few months, Mark filled the gaping holes in the trailer's walls with double-glazed windows, which we'd gotten free or cheap over the last couple of years. We ripped up ancient carpets to reveal not-too-bad linoleum, hauled out a broken washer and dryer, and mended a few leaks in the roof. Overall, I'd say we put maybe \$2,500 into installing and closing in our 500 square foot home—\$5 per square foot—and the vast majority of that went to the trailer-hauling company.

Our trailer gave us freedom to focus on our dreams, so Mark was able to scratch his inventing itch and come up with a POOP-free chicken waterer ([www.AvianAquaMiser.com](http://www.AvianAquaMiser.com)) that began to put bread on the table. I was able to spend my days doing what I loved as well—playing in the garden and writing about my adventures. As other trailer-dwellers will remark in the case studies later in this book, we enjoyed the camping elements of early trailer life, and valued the way it made us take part in the natural world.



*Nature sometimes comes to visit us in our trailer.*

Although the construction of trailers is somewhat shoddy, that very simplicity gives the homeowner freedom to try his untrained hand at home improvement with impunity. I learned about studs, insulation, and electric wiring, while Mark completely changed the layout of the main room, ripping out a divider to combine the kitchen and living room into one large space. I would have been afraid to make such major changes in a traditional house, but working on our trailer was a bit like playing with legos—we couldn't go wrong.



*Keeping our housing simple allowed us to work only part time and to spend the rest of our hours experimenting and gardening.*

Doing what you love often requires you to tighten your belt at first, but then money seems to move toward you via osmosis. Without spending much time on the money-making side of our homestead, our income increased to the point that we were able to start thinking about improving our living space without going into debt. As I'll explain in later chapters, we added an alcove so we could install an energy-efficient wood stove and hired a friend to put on a roof and a couple of porches. Other trailer-dwellers have aimed their home-improvement funds at insulating and interior design, with the result that many visitors can't even tell they're walking through a mobile home.

The best part about our trailer is purely financial. After our initial startup costs, we can now live on next to nothing. While most folks around us are paying rent or a mortgage, our housing bill comes down to a measly \$300 per year that we throw at the county in property taxes, and we have no debt to force us into an off-farm job.





*Me, Mark, and our patient farm dog Lucy beside our oilseed radish cover crop.*

I consider the trailer one of Mark's biggest strokes of genius because it has let us work only a few hours per week on income-driven projects, then spend the rest of our waking hours pouring our hearts and souls into becoming more self-sufficient. If you subscribe to voluntary simplicity, you could do much worse than scouring the countryside for a free trailer to live in.

# What is a mobile home?

Before I go any further into my ode to the trailer, I should back up and make sure you know what I'm talking about. The term "trailer" is a reminder of the roots of the mobile home, in the small travel trailers many people haul behind trucks when they go on vacation. Beginning in the 1950s, these travel trailers started to be marketed as a cheap housing option, at which point they were enlarged and renamed "mobile homes."

Mobile homes are distinguished from modular homes by the wheels and axles underneath the former. While both mobile homes and modular homes are constructed in a factory, modular homes are brought to their new location on a flatbed truck, hauled atop a foundation with a crane, and never moved again. Mobile homes can be pulled behind a large truck and moved multiple times, and they are generally taxed and legislated around as vehicles rather than as real estate. The implications of your home being a vehicle are that your property taxes will usually be lower and you won't have to jump through so many building-code-related hoops before moving in; on the negative side, a mobile home also tends to depreciate in value like a car rather than appreciate like a house, and many banks have fewer financing options available for mobile homes.

Mobile homes can be either single-wides or double-wides. The latter is made by hauling two single-wides, each lacking a wall, to the same spot and joining them together, so you end up with a larger living space (twenty feet or more in width). However, double-wides are very difficult to move after their initial installation and they tend to hold their value like a traditional home, so chances are the free or cheap used trailer you'll come across will be a single-wide.

# Case study: Cheap and green

## Choosing to live in a trailer



*"The low cost of our trailer allowed us to create a home with money in our savings," said Wendy. "A different building option would have required a mortgage."*

"I was the creative director in a marketing firm in New York City before moving to Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. to build a homestead made of waste with my partner Mikey Sklar," Wendy Jehanara Tremayne said.

"All the projects that I do explore a single question, 'Can one live an uncommodified life?'"



*Wendy and Mikey make a living with various online enterprises, including selling wildcrafted and homegrown herbs. You can see their handmade products at [store.holyscraphotsprings.com](http://store.holyscraphotsprings.com).*

"We had been living in a small house but wanted something a little less traditional," her partner Mikey explained. "When we noticed an RV park for sale, we jumped to buy it. The trailer on site had been left behind."





*"The trailer on the land we bought was a modified single-wide from 1967 and had several additions that enlarged it to 1,200 square feet," Mikey said. "It wasn't pretty. Brown paneling and shag carpet covered most of it, even some of the ceiling."*

"At first we did not know we were going to live in it," Wendy said. "We considered hauling it to the landfill. It was old and crappy. The insurance company valued the jalopy at \$1,000. The cost to haul it to landfill was estimated at \$5,000. New building came at the cost of \$200 per square foot. We determined that for \$10 a square foot (less than \$10,000) we could remodel it, and so we did."



*"The remodel amounted to sheetrocking the walls, installing bamboo floors, and we repurposed throwaway wood that we found in a dumpster into trim for the windows. We tiled the bathroom floor and counter with secondhand chipped tile that we laid in a mosaic pattern," Wendy said. "We added a coat of paint to the exterior, reskirted with inexpensive flashing, and trimmed it in dumpster-dived wood that we resurfaced."*

"Our trailer park was expensive, so the move was not about saving money," said Mikey. "Remodeling the old trailer saved us the headache of trying to build a house from the ground up in a remote area where there are limited resources."



*Wendy and Mikey furnished their home largely with found materials and a lot of elbow grease.*

"We also had taken a pledge to live out of the waste stream, thus the name of our blog Holy Scrap," said Wendy. "Remodeling [the trailer] was the greenest choice; it prevented the whole place from becoming landfill."

Mikey added, "We have a saying: 'The greenest house is the one that is already there.' We didn't like the idea of hauling a perfectly usable living space to the dump in order to avoid the stigma of living in a trailer. Insulation and thermal mass reduce home utilities. They are not standard issue in trailers. But we have found that utilities can be reduced by adapting to the environment. In the winter we wear a sweater and in the summer we wear shorts."



*Remodeling their trailer taught Wendy and Mikey skills they use to keep the household running on less. Here, Wendy is building their greywater system.*

"Because our trailer was valueless (according to the insurance company, who said it was worth \$1,000), it presented us with a risk-free starting point and an opportunity to learn new skills," Wendy said. "The renovation taught us to use tools and work with building materials. Though the trailer may not last forever, the skills will!"

"We had never renovated anything before. Working on a old and valueless trailer presented little risk. It was easy to find the courage to try new things," added Mikey.

## **Debt-free housing**





*A shaded outdoor space makes summer life in a trailer much more enjoyable.*

Wendy has a less-than-mainstream approach to debt and the American dream. "When I see people driving new cars and living in new houses, I wonder if they do so because they did not have the money to make another choice. Did they have to get a sucker's car loan or mortgage with bad terms because they had no liquidity? I wonder about what it might be like to live a debt-heavy life that requires working a lot to support debt.

"Poverty looks different today. A debt-free life in a trailer means freedom. Fancy new cars and homes are symbols of a tradeoff.

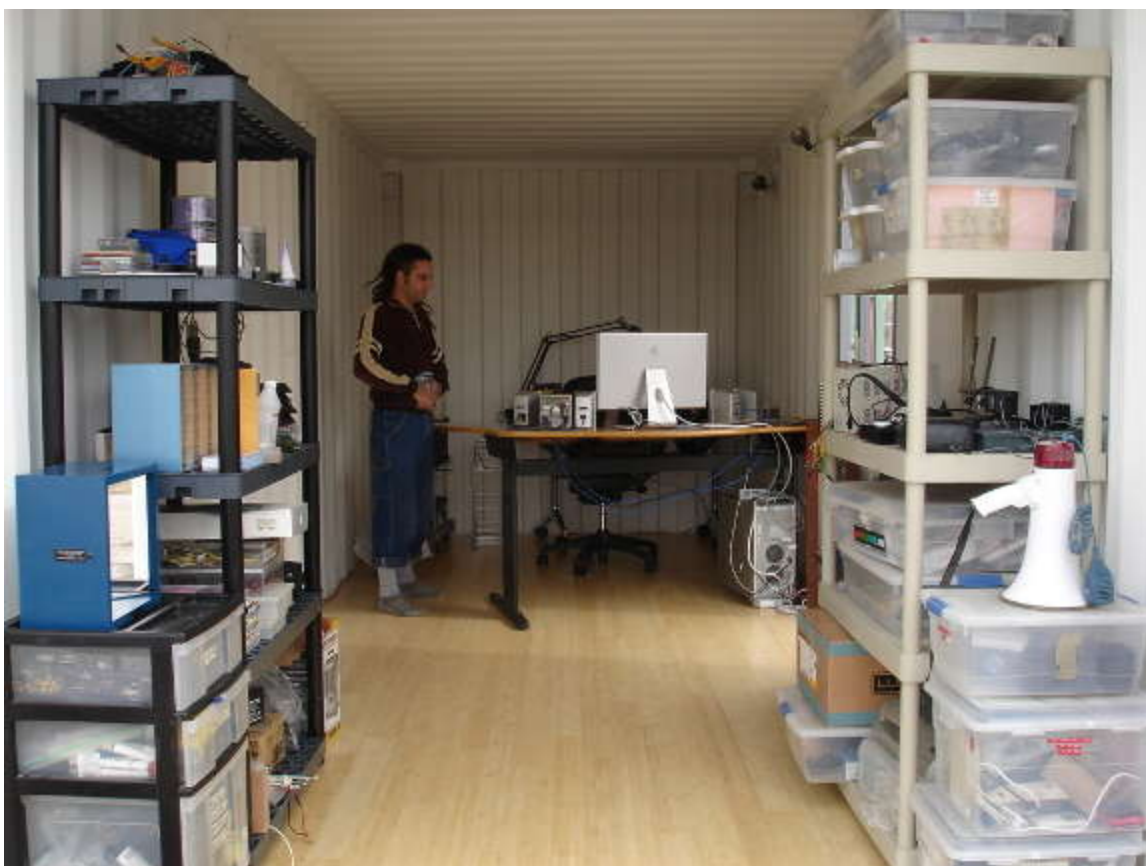
"Our trailer is in a part of the country in which trailer life is common. It's not like New York City. In New Mexico, trailers are not associated with poverty. Where we live in Truth or Consequences, many people buy old trailers and fix them up in the same way that we did, new sheetrock and wood floors. The weather is mild in New Mexico, the climate dry; trailers

last."

"I don't think living in a trailer will make you popular, but it doesn't seem to hurt," intrailer

"Living here changed my perception of poverty and abundance," Wendy added. "When the stock market crashed in 2008 and foreclosures hit 14% in nearby cities, the community we live in, largely made up of trailers, had a foreclosure rate of less than 4%. At first I couldn't understand this. New Mexico is a poor state and Truth or Consequences is a poor city even by New Mexico standards. This is a modern shift in what poverty looks like. People in wealthier areas living in more expensive homes were losing them to banks while poor people in southern New Mexico were living life as usual. People lived in inexpensive trailers that had long been paid off. Life went on as usual. We hardly felt a blip. Likewise the thrift shops and consignment stores on Main Street and Broadway stayed open. They continued to sell used stuff. New Mexico was so good at being poor that when the economy collapsed we didn't notice."

### **Disadvantages of the trailer life**



*One shipping container houses Mikey's electronics lab and another provides storage space.*

Although both members of the couple were enthusiastic about many aspects of trailer life, when asked if they would take a hypothetical debt-free "dream home", Wendy and Mikey expressed willingness to upgrade. "We're growing out of our trailer," Wendy said, mentioning two shipping containers they have in the yard to supplement their 1,200-square-foot trailer and additions. "We're considering buying two more [shipping containers] so that we have dedicated space for fermenting and for our cottage industry."

When it came to the dream home, Wendy had lots of question. "I wouldn't wish to take on the taxes, utilities, or maintenance of such a place. I am sure I would not want to clean it! But we could use the space for a workshop, bigger and higher functioning kitchen, and our cottage industry. My answer really hinges on the details. What is that home made out of? What is its orientation? Does it face south? How is it heated and cooled?

If it were a smart home, built sustainably, windows facing south, and space laid out well, I might say yes! Since the deal includes that I couldn't sell it, it would have to come ready to go and not require an investment of my labor or time."

Mikey's reaction was simpler: "Yeah, I'd take it," he said, "Assuming the home was in a area I wanted to live. Trailers are okay, but I'd rather have a real house."



*Painting the seams of the roof with an elastomeric paint prevents leaks during New Mexico's sporadic rains. Since the trailer cost so little, the couple have been able to move off the grid with solar panels. They do spend a small amount of money per year in connection fees to the electric and gas grids as a backup.*

@-fd

They both recognized major downsides to their trailer life. Wendy wished the structure had a better roof, recognizes that the fiberboard drop ceiling can bear no weight, and isn't thrilled by the loud forced air. Mikey adds



leaks at the junctions between trailer and additions, inexpensive fixtures, and an orientation wrong for passive solar gain to the list of disappointments, along with low ceilings that threaten to bump the heads of tall visitors. Both are less than thrilled with what Wendy calls "barely working single pane windows," but they've chosen not to replace them because, as Mikey explains, "The resale value is questionable."



*Wendy leverages the trailer's windows for herb-drying.*

"If I didn't live in a trailer I'd put a wood-burning stove in my living room," added Wendy. "Instead I have the less-than-wonderful wall-mount gas heater."

### **A parent's perspective**

Since social stigma is one of the reasons many homesteaders choose to steer clear of trailers, I was interested to hear from people near and dear to our



trailersteaders' hearts. Mikey's mother and father agreed to share their impressions with me, and both were very supportive of the couple's decision. They seemed more floored by Mikey's choice to quit a job that had provided a \$110,000 Christmas bonus than by his current lifestyle.

"What did surprise us was Mikey's and Wendy's return to a barter economy basics, self-help carpentry, and construction skills," reported David, Mikey's father. "When they first got there, Mikey used to trade fresh bread for information. Equally, everything had to be natural in origin or recycled.

"Over the years, they found new ways to make money. Used local produce to make tea, wine, beer, and bread. They remain young at heart, joyfully together, and enjoy a freedom of time and lifestyle they never could have maintained in the structured environment of the city or their jobs. They raft on inner tubes down the Rio Grande, and eat their own fruit and vegetables.

"Are they happy? Their lifestyle is rewarding and changes as much as they do. Wendy writes and makes new discoveries every day in yard and kitchen. Mikey invents and explores new things from sales on ebay to 12 day wine-making. They are exciting to talk to, and involved in their quest and each other. No parent can ask for more."

### **Wendy and Mikey's recommendations**



*Wendy and Mikey share their home with two cats and a dog.*

Mikey's advice for folks considering trailer life is simple: "Remodel right away and be sure you have somewhere else to live while doing it. For a trailer to be super-cool, it needs to be clean. Ditch the shag and hide the paneling."@-fd

"I recommend trailer living provided you live in a mild climate," Wendy said. "I certainly recommend remodeling trailers of any size and using them for a home, guesthouse, or artist workshop. Small trailers make wonderful projects for learning new skills. They are not expensive to remodel and can often be done using waste found free in your community. It is a worthy task to continuously seek to live with less stuff, even if it is forced upon you by having a small home!"

To read more about Wendy and Mikey's adventures, visit their blog at [blog.holyscraphotspings.com](http://blog.holyscraphotspings.com), Wendy's website at [www.gaiatreehouse.com](http://www.gaiatreehouse.com), and Mikey's website at [screwdecaf.cx](http://screwdecaf.cx). Wendy's first book, *The Good Life*

*Lab: Radical Experiments in Living Beyond Money*, will be published by Storey Publishing in 2013.

# Mobile homes as tiny houses

## The tiny house movement

Known variously as the "tiny house" or "small house" movement, some families are choosing to buck the trend toward larger and larger homes and are instead opting to live in human-sized dwellings. Even though the houses she profiled (averaging about 1,839 square feet) are much larger than the 500 square foot cutoff the movement currently employs, many believe that the tiny house movement was initiated by Susan Susanka's 1998 book *The Not So Big House*. Regardless of where the movement began, though, the idea of living in a small house is gaining momentum in homesteading and environmentalist circles and is worth considering by those interested in voluntary simplicity.

To put the tiny house movement in perspective, let's look at the size of the American home over time. In 1950, the average dwelling clocked in at 983 square feet and sheltered 3.34 people (providing 294 square feet per person). By 2004 the average American's personal space had risen to 914 square feet (a 2,349 square feet home divided by 2.57 people per household). Those numbers mean that the modern American today has nearly as much space to himself as an entire family did fifty years ago.

These extra-large houses cost us an arm and a leg to build, and many Americans simply assume they have to face thirty years of debt if they want to own their own home. Meanwhile, environmental costs don't stop after the houses are erected (using more than twice the supplies a 1950s home did, of course). In a previous era, owners of large houses closed off portions for the winter, but now most Americans wouldn't dream of having an unheated second story, of moving their workshop to an unfinished barn for summer use, or of keeping their winter clothes in a shed.

While I find the concept behind the tiny house movement refreshing, the price tag still gives me sticker shock. One report suggests that the average tiny house costs \$20,000 to \$50,000 to erect, plus years of labor (since most



are owner-built). This book arose out of a wish to suggest a cheaper and more environmentally friendly option to the tiny house crowd—an old mobile home.

#### trailer

While a trailer can't compete with many tiny houses aesthetically (at least at first), the ecological footprint could be argued to be much lower if you select a mobile home that has already been lived in for forty years and was headed for the dump. Trailers also give budding builders a less daunting project to learn on, provide the flexibility to move your house to a new plot of land, and save a lot of cash. If you're aiming for true DIY simplicity, trailersteading is the way to go.

# How small is too small?

The term "tiny house" begs the question—how small is too small? I grew up in a 616 square foot house, which I shared with my parents and two siblings, and I'll admit I felt cramped at times. An array of readers chimed in with their minimum space requirements, and many of those came in right around 150 to 160 square feet per person, which I'll agree is near the dividing line between cramped and manageable. Most trailers will provide at least this amount of space as long as your family is not much larger than the American norm.

While it's easy advise tiny-house dwellers to "just cut down on the amount of stuff you own," it's actually a bit trickier for an American used to sprawling through a large house to enjoy life in a trailer or small house.

Here are some tips for making small spaces work for you:

**Remember economies of scale.** It's easier for two people to live in 300 square feet than for one person to live in 150 square feet because you can double up the bathroom, kitchen, and other communal spaces.

**Find places to be alone.** I don't think I could have survived in our small house as a teenager if I hadn't enjoyed an outdoor retreat where I spent all my time between school and supper. It's good for all of us to have private spaces, even if they're tiny, outdoors, or down at the local coffee shop.

**Make every inch count.** People who live in small spaces often find ingenious ways to arrange one area so it performs multiple functions. Is your dining table also counter space for meal preparation and a spot for kids to work on their homework? Does a bathtub in the living room double as a padded bench for company? Can you store seldom-used kitchen equipment on shelves near the ceiling or on hooks in the wall? You'll probably need to build many of these double-duty pieces of house-scaping yourself, but that's half the fun.

**Take advantage of community buildings.** One of our blog readers

wrote in to tell me that the trend toward small houses in Japan is mitigated by neighborhood meeting houses, which are used for community gatherings and can also be rented out by individuals. This option is sometimes available in the United States as well; for example, we recently discovered that we have an inexpensive community space nearby where we can put up our guests or host our Thanksgiving dinner. Even though you typically have to pay for these options, it's generally cheaper than living in a larger home.

**Get creative about storage.** Many of the things we fill our houses with are just waiting to be used once or twice a year. An unheated, unfinished shed an energy-efficient qu'd can take a lot of pressure off your inside space—just make sure you don't store anything there that shouldn't be frozen and do keep cloth and food in sealed containers to prevent incursions by mice, ants, and other pests. If you don't have the cash to build a shed and also don't have nosy neighbors, you can follow my mother's lead and store winter clothes in junked cars along your driveway. (Yes, I do come from a long line of permaculture rednecks—reduce, reuse, recycle!)



*Sitting under a tin roof during a thunderstorm is one of the simple joys of life.*

**Enjoy the outdoors.** In *The Tiny Book of Tiny Houses*, Lester Walker reports that historically small houses often moved the toilet, bathing, and kitchen facilities outside. Other parts of the house that can bulge into the outdoors include dining and relaxing. We added porches onto our trailer in the summer of 2012, one of which was an 8 foot by 16 foot roofed space which (including materials and labor) cost \$950 and was worth every penny. Not only do porches (and gazebos, summer kitchens, etc.) take the pressure off small indoor spaces, they also give you a great opportunity to watch butterflies during lunch and to enjoy the antics of your chickens during dinner. If you need a less permanent space, the big box stores often sell shade canopies for \$100 or less.

**Your surroundings make all the difference.** If you have the opportunity to buy a homestead, you'll have to make a choice—more



land or a larger dwelling. While our trailer would seem excessively cramped in a trailer park, when surrounded by 58 acres of paradise, it instead feels like a castle. I highly recommend that you do whatever it takes to make your surroundings top notch so that a tiny house is a place you only want to retreat to during cold winter nights and drizzly days.

These tips aside, it's worth looking at a tiny house as an asset rather than as an inconvenience—many people move to small spaces precisely because the reduced quarters require them to simplify their lives. "Divesting as much of our rarely-used space and getting into a right-sized space was one of our top motivations when we moved out of our house and into our trailer," wrote one of my RV-dwelling friends. Take his advice and don't be afraid of a small space—the economical, environmental, and psychological rewards are more than worth it.

## Case study: A retro trailer



*Miles enjoys the simplicity of his 1955 Spartan Imperial Mansion.*

When asked how he feels about his trailer, Miles Flansburg said, "We love it!" He and his family live near Denver in a modern American home, but they bought a 1955 Spartan Imperial Mansion to place on their land in Wyoming, which Miles gets to visit for a week per month. He found the 8-by-42-foot trailer for \$5,500, spent another \$1,000 fixing it up, and now has a free place to stay during his time off.

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*Trailer parks are a good place to find old trailers at a low price.*

"I was looking for a quick, cheap, easy shelter and I found this trailer on Craigslist," Miles explained. "My wife agreed to it. The kids really do not care. It allowed us to have a nice little shelter on our land. We would still be camping in a tent if not for the trailer. And in this area, bears and lions are a concern."



*Smaller trailers are much easier to transport to their new home.*

When asked about the advantages of trailer life, Miles focused on the basics—a cheap, quick living space that's easy to clean. He also mentioned that having such a small home tempts you to spend more time outside, turning your life into "a big camping trip", with the trailer simply being a place to eat and sleep.





*Small kitchens are one disadvantage that can be remedied with careful renovation.*

Miles had a long history of living in mobile homes, so he knew what to expect. As a child, his family lived in rental trailers a couple of times and Miles said, "I did feel a little less worthy about myself. The 'American Dream' is a powerful force. But I do not remember anyone else making me feel bad."





*A trailer allowed Miles to spend more time on his land with little fuss.*

As an adult, he and his family have used trailers as transition housing during moves. "We would rent a trailer and then take our time finding the right home to live in. We would pack up everything but the basics and put that in storage. It seemed like a much simpler life, but we are all so used to bigger homes that it is a big change from one to another. I personally would not mind living more simply, but my family is used to having more room. After living in large homes, it is hard to get used to the smaller space. You really have to economize your stuff."



*Trailers tempt their inhabitants to spend more time enjoying the outdoors.*

Although Miles tends to call his trailer a "cottage" or "camper", he hasn't found much stigma attached to the lifestyle. "The old Spartans are actually pretty retro and romantic," he said, then went on to mention the online community of people who collect, restore and live in Spartan Trailers (<http://autos.groups.yahoo.com/group/Spartantrailercoaches/>). The internet friendships made his adventure" src="kindle:embed:00erso much easier and more fun.

# **Disadvantages of trailer homesteading**

## **Why we don't all live in trailers**

I love my trailer—sometimes I feel like nicknaming it Independence because of all of the life choices the living space has simplified. However, when I put the question out to my blog readers asking them to comment on why they wouldn't want to live in a trailer, many valid points came streaming back to me. The quotes in the following sections come from those homesteaders or homesteaders-to-be, plus my mother (Adrianne), father (Errol), and mother-in-law (Rose Nell).

Luckily, most of the negative points of trailer life can be worked around with careful renovations or can be re-envisioned in a positive light. Later chapters give tips on rehabbing trailers, but I also include some pointers in the sections that follow for taking lemons and making lemonade.

# Fire

*Sara: I notice a lot of people are worried about safety, and that's one of my biggest concerns, too. I don't know a lot about design differences in trailers, but my dad has worked in construction for over 30 years and was impressed with our 1998 model that is made out of a pretty standard wall construction—wooden studs with fiberglass insulation and fire-resistant sheetrock on the inside. There's a lot of plywood, but I don't think our place is too much more flammable than the typical stick-frame house. The fact that it is off the ground would probably feed a lot more oxygen into a fire, though.*

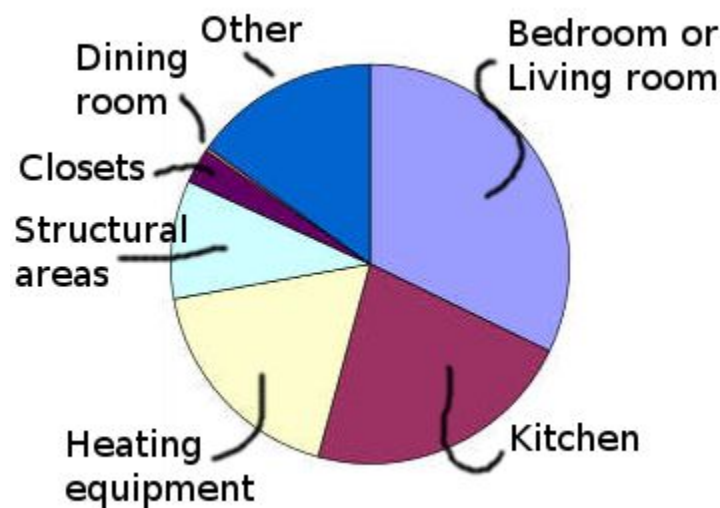
*Errol: When you mentioned getting a trailer to live in, my first concern was for the many trailer fire deaths in the area. Trailers are built using extremely inflammable substances and people have less than three minutes to get out if there is a fully involved fire. Because older trailers are built with two inch walls, they are expensive to heat using their original electric furnaces. So many folks install wood or coal stoves, often in the cheapest way, leading to a high death rate from fires. So I urged you to not do this.*

*Michelle: I remember learning in fire safety courses that from the point of ignition to there being nothing left but the steel frame underneath is three minutes when a trailer burns.*

The most feared aspect of living in a mobile home is fire. Although the three-minutes-to-complete-destruction figure bandied about doesn't seem to have a basis in the literature, mobile home fires are more likely to result in mortality than fires in a more traditional house. The 1979 government document *Mobile Home Fire Studies: Summary and Recommendations* reported that although "the incidence rate was approximately the same, the injury and life hazard and the extent of property damage per incident were three to five times greater [for mobile homes] than for conventional residences." In other words, you're no more likely to have a fire in your mobile home, but the average mobile home fire is more costly to possessions and life than the average house fire.

thermal efficiency of d k l

Before I delve into the problems associated with mobile homes and fire (and how you can prevent your trailer from burning down), it's worth backing up and understanding house fires in general. In most cases, residential fires are localized and small—perhaps a pan of hot oil goes up in flames, you throw baking soda on the fire, and the problem is solved. The danger is that a small fire can spread to nearby objects and to the structure of the house itself, a phase known as flashover, at which point heat and gases can cause death if you don't exit quickly.



*Cigarette smoking igniting bedding or sofas was the leading cause of mobile home fires in the 1979 study, with range-related kitchen fires following close behind.*

Assuming you don't smoke, most fires start in the kitchen. In mobile homes, these range fires quickly reach the flashover stage since there is usually a flammable cabinet directly above the stove. I think this is where the three minute figure comes from since the report cited above concludes:

"Without a metal range hood, sustained burning of the Class C cabinet underside occurred within three minutes after ignition in the majority of tests with a cooking oil fire."

Luckily, there are some pretty simple steps mobile home dwellers can take to ensure that a fire on the stove doesn't burn their trailer down. The study mentioned above recommends adding a range hood located at least two feet



above the stove top and extending at least five inches forward past the edge of the cabinet, with a quarter inch or thicker piece of flame resistant material sandwiched between the underside of the cabinet and the range hood. Cabinets within eighteen inches horizontal distance of the stove top should also have a flame-resistant bottom added, and the same material can be used to fire-proof the wall behind the stove. Alternatively, you can go a step further and coat these surfaces with stainless steel sheets, backed with non-flammable insulation, an option which is not only fire-proof but is also easy to clean. These measures will give you more time to put out a fire in the ignition stage, which will protect your possessions and life.

Another problem with mobile homes is the particle-board interior walls, which tend to be quite flammable. If you can afford it, this is another good place to start your renovations, replacing the current siding with a material in the NFPA or IBC class A, which will have a flame spread index (FSI) below 25. Options include gypsum wallboard, gypsum sheeting (aka drywall), fiber-cement board, inorganic reinforced cement board, or fire-retardant-treated plywood (although the last may cause some outgassing). With a 4 foot by 8 foot sheet of drywall currently costing \$10, replacing the walls and ceiling in a medium-sized mobile home won't break the bank (although it might break your back).

Of course, all of the traditional fire-safety tips also apply. Install smoke detectors and change their batteries regularly, keep the appropriate type of fire extinguishers near the stove and know how to use them, and have a fire escape plan that everyone in the family understands. Never leave stoves, candles, or other potential fire hazards unattended, and keep heaters a safe distance away from flammable objects. With those fire prevention energy-star appliancesgo they on measures in place, along with retrofits to the most problematic features of mobile homes, you should be as safe or safer than someone living in a traditional house who never thinks about their smoke detector.

# Chemical offgassing

*Michelle: The main reason I won't live in one now, though, is the chemical offgassing. Trailers have a distinct smell. I know that as they age it supposedly gets better, but the trailer my parents bought in 1984 STILL has the same smell as the day we brought it home. It may be milder, but it's still there. There is a high incidence of cancer on both sides of my family, and I do everything I know how to take care of my body and prevent that dreadful disease.*

Another common fear associated with mobile homes is that chemicals offgassed by the construction materials will make you sick. This is a very valid concern for new trailers, but the older trailers you'll find free or cheap have already lost most or all of the harmful chemicals.

For example, particleboard emits formaldehyde, which has a half-life of around six years (shorter in hot, damp areas and longer in cold, dry areas). Those of you who remember your high school chemistry will know that a half-life simply refers to the length of time required for half of the chemicals to dissipate. So, after a trailer is six years old, half of the formaldehyde is gone; at twelve years old, three quarters (half plus half of a half) is gone; at eighteen years old, 87.5% is gone; and at twenty-four years old, 93.75% is gone. Free trailers are often thirty or forty years old, at which point levels of hazardous chemicals will be extremely low.

If you stumble across a newer mobile home at a low price, some experts suggest that you might be able to bake out the harmful chemicals. Find somewhere else to live for a couple of days while you turn on the heat to raise the interior trailer temperature to 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Then open all the windows and use fans to push air out. The technique is somewhat controversial, but it shouldn't hurt (although it might melt your candles and will raise your heating bill).

While you're at it, you should be very careful of new materials you put back into any living space. The new paint smell is a sign of outgassing and you'll also be introducing chemicals to your home on particle board, wood stains,

carpets, and synthetic fibers and foams. As with the formaldehyde issue, older is safer, so reclaimed wood from a deconstruction zone and old furniture from the thrift store is not only cheap, it's also better for your health.

## Lack of insulation

*Rebecca: My main complaint with our early 1980s mobile home is keeping it comfortable in extreme weather. We (not so affectionately) call it our "tin can." The metal siding acts as a miserable heat conductor...cooking us in the summer sun and then whisking away the warmth in the winter.*

If you unscrew the siding on most mobile homes, you'll see that the wall to spend more time on living in as are built with two by twos instead of two by four studs and the ceiling is probably framed with two by fours instead of deeper lumber. These smaller-than-usual cavities keep the weight of the trailer at a minimum so you can transport it to its new home, but they also prevent the inclusion of much insulation. This isn't one of those lemonade issues—a later chapter will suggest several methods you can use to insulate a mobile home so it no longer has the tin can effect. And if you're in a hurry, check out the case study below.

## Case study: Building a house for your trailer



*Will's travel trailer outlived his marriage and first farm. He and his trailer are pictured here in their new location.*

Will spent nearly three years in his 32-foot Fire Ball trailer. "[My wife and I] were living in a condo at Shilshole Bay in Seattle when the nesting urge overcame us and we decided to have a house built out on a 6.5 acre piece of property we owned overlooking the Snoqualmie River valley near Carnation," Will began. "As the house design became grander and the engineering requirements from the county more onerous, we realized that we would have to begin an austerity program during the build. With our backgrounds well steeped in outdoor living and roughing it in general, we soon came to agreement that to park a travel trailer on the property would be perfect in all respects. We would save money on housing, we would be



near to the construction site, and we would be living out in the forest.  
Perfect!"



*Will's favorite aspects of living in his travel trailer included the low cost and the foresty feeling of residing in the woods.*

Will and his wife enjoyed many parts of the trailer life, but the move was a shock in other ways. The biggest problem was keeping the uninsulated space warm with only propane, since their farm was off-grid. Will had a solution, though: "Having read a lot about passive solar home design over the years, we decided to build an envelope around the trailer based on an easily erectable metal carport. That winter we lived with only the roof of the carport protecting us and dressed warmly while at home."



*To keep the trailer warm, Will erected a passive solar shell around it.*

"But in our second summer, disaster struck when my wife was diagnosed with cancer," Will continued. "The house was lagging way behind schedule, winter loomed, and trips to the hospital became a way of life as she underwent chemo, then radiation. She took a leave from her job and I struggled to keep her warm up there all alone during the days while I worked."





*A wood stove in the carport and a propane sailboat heater in the trailer made life more comfortable.*

"First of all, I built walls into the 16-by-40-foot carport with glass windows along the south side and insulation on the north. Then I installed a small propane sailboat fireplace heater vented through the trailer and carport roofs, and also fashioned a vent for the trailer's forced air and water heaters. This created a still-air envelope around the trailer and helped significantly to keep things warm inside...but not warm enough. So I got an older wood stove and installed it in one corner of the enclosed carport. This really helped and often I could fire up the wood stove and turn off all the trailer heaters during the night."

Unfortunately, his wife's worsening condition eventually forced the pair to sell their newly constructed house (which they had never had the opportunity to live in), but Will was able to pull his trailer back to town as a consolation prize. By 2012, his wife is doing well, but the pair have split up and Will has found another farm. He lived in his Fire Ball while cleaning up the current farmhouse and still keeps the trailer around for guests.

All told, the heating improvements in the Fire Ball's original location cost \$2,700, which included \$1,200 for the carport, \$500 for wood, insulation, and glass to enclose it, \$800 for the sailboat heater, and \$200 for the wood stove. While Will's choice might not have been the cheapest option, it was a fast and dirty solution during a crisis situation, and the carport could have become a shop or extra living space had everything gone as planned with their original house build.

## No basement

*Deb: The one reason I would not want to live in a trailer is that it doesn't have a basement. Growing up in Texas where tornadoes are a regular fact of life and basements can save lives, and then moving to New England where every house had a basement which, depending on the home, could be used for cool storage of food, or act as a cooler sleeping area in the hot humid summer (few in New England have air conditioning), I would be at a loss without that very important part of the house. Ok, that was a really long sentence, but basements seem to somehow connect the house as part of the land, and I would feel too "temporary" in a mobile home.*

Lack of a basement is a definite disadvantage of the mobile home. Of course, many traditional homes lack basements too, and a standalone root cellar actually preserves food better than a basement connected to a house. But those who wish for a basement can go the extra step to build one under their trailer—see the case study "An incognito trailer" for more information.



## Long term cost

*Errol: Over a period of years, I've observed people add onto their trailers with new roofs, new rooms, etc., until a stick-built house surrounds the original trailer. This is don@go they e as the trailer seems less adequate for its occupants. For both cost and quality reasons, it makes more sense to design a house for the long haul, one which can be built by modules as need requires and money allows. Designing with your needs, heating efficiency, and landscape in mind will end up with a much better fit than retrofitting around an inadequately designed trailer.*

*Another important issue with trailers is their economic consequences. A local economy benefits when a local product is taken as close to a finished product as possible. Compared to local stick building, which employs relatively skilled workers in the community at a decent wage, trailers drain local money out of the community to a centralized location where more money goes to corporate profits. So trailers are, initially, a drain on the local economy. The drain isn't just the lack of labor income. It includes a loss to local building suppliers, and all the support industry surrounding home construction. Secondhand trailers, of course, are a different matter.*

Although my father's figures sound realistic on the surface, I think that most people who compare building a new home to renovating an existing space don't include all of the costs into the former. Let's say you're going to build a small straw-bale home for your family, planning to take the year off and use your own elbow-grease to keep the cost down to \$50,000. You sign a 30 year mortgage to make that happen (meaning you'll add an extra \$30,000 to the cost in interest payments), take a year off work (perhaps a \$40,000 loss depending on your salary), and have to continue to rent for a year (\$16,000) while making your dream a reality. The total price tag of that home comes to \$136,000.

On the other hand, the trailersteaders interviewed in this book have proven that you can move into a very nice trailer nearly immediately for \$22,000 or

less. David and Mary's incognito trailer (profiled later), with a full basement, roof, extensive insulation, and general impression of being a modern stick-built home, cost about \$40,000 (in today's dollars) to buy, install, and renovate, giving the couple extra cash to spend on solar panels and a windmill.

These figures mean you'd be saving 84% by moving into a nice trailer now, and perhaps 71% over your lifetime if you continue to improve your trailer into a top-notch home. Even if you compare these trailer costs to a tiny-house builder who paid for everything up front and did the construction on weekends, so he only spent \$50,000 on his house, the renovated trailer comes out ahead.

As a final note in favor of a trailer, there's no danger of losing it all when times get tough if you pay as you go. Don't trailers look like a better investment now?

# Depreciation and impermanence

*Heather W: I would certainly live in [a mobile home], but, given options, I would not choose one as my permanent residence because of their "throw-away" nature. What I mean by this is that where I live (Canada), they are not a good investment at all and are looked upon as temporary. You cannot easily get financing for them and often, they have to be replaced.... Their value does not appreciate energy-star appliancesgo they . A well-built home can withstand the test of time, over hundreds of years.*

*Adrianne: I have changed in how I relate to your living in a trailer. At first, I looked on it as temporary, and thought you might want to start building your own "permanent" house. Now, I realize that lots of places people live in are temporary, even if they own them. For people's lives do change.*



*One of Rose Nell's three rental trailers.*

For another perspective, I dropped an email to my mother-in-law, Rose Nell, who owns three trailers in Kentucky. She lived in one for several

years, now rents out all three, and is looking to sell them. Rose Nell wrote to me about the disadvantages of trailers that aren't your primary residence:

*In hindsight, a trailer depreciates with every passing year. It makes it hard to get proper insurance to cover all expenses if something bad happens.*

*With a stick house, everything one does to improve the house makes it increase in value, and even if you do nothing to improve, it appreciates.*

*If I had all the money that I have invested into these trailers at the beginning, I would not have rehabbed, but rather invested in something that would appreciate in value. But we are back at the beginning again. No money, looking for my space. Trailers big or small can be the answer.*

This is a fascinating issue, and one where I feel the average homesteader has a long way to go in breaking free of the mainstream American conception of the home as an appreciable asset. We are indoctrinated to believe that we need to build up our credit so we can "buy" a house (mortgaged, of course), which is likely to become our single biggest asset. We spend our lives improving the worth of the structure, hoping that we'll be able to sell it for more than we put into it when we need cash at a later date, and we pay insurance companies 0.35% of the house's value each year to protect that investment.

The lifestyle I advocate requires an abrupt about-face from that traditional point of view. Rather than wishing that your home appreciated, I advocate choosing a spot and sinking down roots so you never want to sell. Put money in the bank for those worst-case-scenario periods (or buy land or gold if you're worried about our banking system), then start your housing with something you can afford—a free or very cheap trailer. Pay as go with improvements, learning building skills in the process and making your home as liveable as possible without pouring too much of your sweat and tears into the process. Be happy when your home depreciates because that means your property taxes are lower and you are that much more

independent of the mainstream economy. Consider following the lead of the Mayans and intentionally under-building, then replacing your living area every fifty-two years (or at whatever interval appeals to you).

For those who aren't quite as radical as I am, you can head back for some more expert advice from my mother-in-law:

*Now if a person, such as me, energy-star appliances go they really wanted to improve on the saleability of my lot with three trailers to make it more easily financed and insurable (meaning the buyer could get financing), I could surrender the certificate of title. There is a process that is backed by Fannie Mae and handled through the states wherein if the manufactured home is attested to be permanently affixed to the land, the trailer can be considered a conversion of the home as an improvement to the real estate upon which it is located.*

*The certificate of title to the manufactured home must be surrendered at the time when the affidavit is filed. The county clerk must not accept the surrender of a certificate of title that shows an unreleased lien unless it is accompanied by a release of such lien. When the county clerk files the affidavit, he or she must provide a copy to the property valuation administrator for inclusion in the the county real property tax rolls. Hence, one's property taxes will increase with that inclusion!*

The choice is yours—turn your trailer into a home and let it appreciate, or take advantage of the low property taxes of a depreciating dwelling. Either way, trailers have the flexibility to suit your lifestyle.



# Aesthetics

*Faith: We've considered a trailer for our future homestead. Here is why we decided against it (for now): My husband is a carpenter who has been building/remodeling his own homes since he was in his twenties. He's very artistic and prefers buildings that are inspiring. And he works for food and beer. If I wasn't married to a fantastic (and visionary) carpenter, I would probably opt for the trailer. But if we can have a larger space for only a little more money, why not go for it?*

*Heather W: I like a good design, pleasing to the eye, and trailers are usually just a long rectangle, rather banal.*

*Adrienne: About aesthetics: I was sort of put off by so much non-wood, also by seemingly a very little bedroom for you. This year, with your porches and the barn fixed, your whole potential has changed.*

My husband and I take a lot of photos and share them with readers on our blog, and I'll admit that I often frame my shots so that our trailer is out of sight. On the other hand, some trailer-dwellers have gone to extremes to make their trailer look just as beautiful on the outside as the average house, and simply adding a couple of porches to our trailer has changed the aesthetic dramatically.

Later chapters will provide lots of tips for remodeling a trailer, and it wouldn't hurt to follow Rebecca's lead (profiled in the next section) to integrate your mobile home into the landscape. But there's also something to be said for learning to enjoy what you have. As Michelle explained below, there's a lot to love about a trailer:

*I grew up in house trailers. I actually love them on an emotional level. They feel more homey to me. I also love that they are designed so smartly! Every single inch of space is utilized in the trailers I've been around. I love that. It seems that stick-built homes often are built*

*with lots of wasted space. My ideal would be to have a stick-built  
home made from the designs of a house trailer.  
an energy-efficient t they*

## Case study: Hiding in the vegetation



*Rebecca added a trellis to one side of her trailer to "distract and create a focal point."*

If you don't have a lot of cash to throw at a remodeling project, plants can make a huge difference in the exterior appearance of a trailer. Rebecca had three goals in her landscaping endeavors—to shade the mobile home during the summer, to screen the blocky shape of the structure, and to provide useful food.



*"I let the bamboo on the other side of our house escape the nursery pots they came in, so now we have a thicket going, which I will eventually thin," wrote Rebecca.*

She started by placing fast-growing trees around the perimeter of the house. "I am really glad I chose a horse chestnut tree, as it has grown very quickly and should be great for shade," Rebecca noted. Since she and her husband added a foundation to their trailer, they were also careful to keep the trees "a reasonable distance away, because tree roots will eventually crack the foundation if planted too close. And also because whenever you work on the outside, you want some wiggle room."

The bamboo and trellis pictured above did a great job breaking up the rectangular shape of the trailer. "I've also let stinging nettle grow in there (it volunteered), which is a great food source in spring. The back of our house faces west and that is where we need the most shade, but we have only just decided to build a system of trellises and grow probably 5 or 6 grape vines. I have to be a little more careful landscaping that area because the septic is behind the house on one side and also some of my vegetable garden, which I don't want to shade too much."



# Zoning

*Sara: I live in a pretty rural area and lots of people here live in trailers. Some people (families, small ethnic enclaves, other low-income communities) squeeze trailers on one spot of land like a game of tetris. With that, there's the valid issue of safety, but there's also so much prejudice and it has definitely seeped into our local planning and zoning discussions.*

*I attended one local planning meeting where I was just appalled at the blatant discrimination against people in trailers. The firm hired to help put the plan together actually pointed out that the punishments that were being proposed were discriminatory. A few examples: trailer communities have to be screened from public view by vegetation or privacy fences and all trailers must have skirting even when they can't be seen from the road, in order to complete all the permitting processes. At one point the planner rolled her eyes about complaints and said "Oh come on, this isn't going to break anyone's wallet. A piece of lattice is \$20. They can just buy it and slap it on. No to spend more time oo living in a one is going to suffer." Haha! As if one piece of lattice would do the job of skirting an entire trailer.*

*Now that's better than those communities where trailers aren't even allowed—but these are becoming increasingly common too. A tiny little city just north of me has already outlawed trailers within the city limits, including very nice, modern double-wides. That's ridiculous.*

*Ultimately, mobile-home manufacturers and other proponents of manufactured housing have been strong advocates against housing discrimination. In the example above, the LA firm's representative pointed out that any ordinances that specifically target people living in trailers and not people in houses is unlawful. Skirting, for example, would have to apply to stick-built homes as well. That means all of those people who like the southern look of houses on piers would have to conceal their open underparts, too. Still, local governments can often find some ways around federal housing laws, and it's probably*

*going to be more and more challenging to find a place where you can move your trailer, even if you own the land.*

Unfortunately, there's not much to say about the zoning issue, which is related to the stigma problem outlined in a later section. On the other hand, you might want to think twice about moving to an area that has zoning restrictions outlawing mobile homes. These same upscale communities are likely to have neighborhood covenants requiring you to dry your clothes inside rather than hanging them on a line and are unlikely to be thrilled if you bring home a milk goat. Poverty-stricken regions allow you the freedom to choose your own homesteading adventure, and even if your politics don't line up with those of your neighbors, you can probably learn to get along. Check out the section on choosing an ugly-duckling property for more information.

# Trailer parks

*Rose Nell: Living in a trailer park, even if you own your trailer you are living in, you have to pay to lease the land, pay utilities, and in some cases park permits and fees.*

Not only do expenses add up when living in a trailer park, most independent-minded folks just don't enjoy the experience of living cheek-to-jowl with so many neighbors. In a pinch, you can build community wherever you're at, but all of the trailersteaders I've interviewed hauled their trailers out of the park ASAP and I recommend you do the same.

Just think, if your house is essentially free, you might be able to afford quite a bit of land, especially if you choose an ugly-duckling property. I can attest to the fact that trailer-hauling companies can pull a trailer up a steep mountainside, across a creek, through miles of mud, and into just about any location you can imagine.

# Social stigma

*Adrienne: I think it is true, at least from what I've read of people who live in trailers in Maine (and probably in New Hampshire), that the school-age kids from trailers are more looked down on. The term "double-wide" is pejorative, in some people's mouths: people make fun of them for boasting that they live in a double-wide immediately. '.*

*Rose Nell: The stigma we hear of is "trailer trash", which stems from ignorance of those who do not respect other people in any facet of life that one does not agree. I have always heard of row houses (older duplexes found in the low-rent districts of different cities), being said in a negative manner as well.*

Are you trailer trash if you live in a trailer? Perusing the words of the many trailer-dwellers I interviewed, I began to realize that there are a couple of facets of trailer-life that may cause your community do look down upon you.

Counterintuitively, mobile homes have more stigma among the lower-middle class and the upper-lower class than among people who come from more money. I suspect this is related to the way I enjoyed running barefoot as a child but my husband's aunt was always careful to don shoes—she didn't want anyone to think she couldn't afford appropriate footwear, while my mother (raised in the middle class) wasn't afraid of the stigma.

Voluntary simplicity in general is better received among the upper classes, who want to return to a simpler lifestyle, than by people struggling to ensure that their children live easier lives than they did. For example, Deb, the mother of Mikey (profiled in the "Cheap and green" section), was firm in her avoidance of the trailer stigma:

*In short "NO", I never felt that they were "moving down" to trailer living. My husband David and I were very excited that they were taking this opportunity to follow their dream. If anything, I envy their lifestyle and sometimes wish I could start again and live like them.*

As an adult, you can generally choose to socialize with people who respect your efforts toward simple living, but children are more likely to bear the brunt of class-based discrimination. Any form of simple living, from trailersteading to growing your own vegetables, will have the same effect. For example, when I was a teenager, I was leery of bringing friends to our home, which was a traditional, cinderblock house, but much smaller and less expensively furnished than the homes of other students in my classes. On the other hand, despite some teen angst at being forced to live with my parents' ethical choices, I'm now very grateful that I was raised simply since it made me less fearful of tightening my belt on my own path to homestead independence.

If you're not willing to thumb your nose at the world, there's the other alternative—blend in. A trailer can be renovated to look just like a stick-built home. Even without fancy additions, a well-manicured lawn and flowerbeds can appeal to the neighbors if you want to go that route.



# Finding and moving to the land

## Case study: Trailer park to woodland paradise

### Stepping stone trailer



*Jonathan and Andrea bought a mobile home in a trailer park, where they lived for two years while searching for the perfect tract of land.*

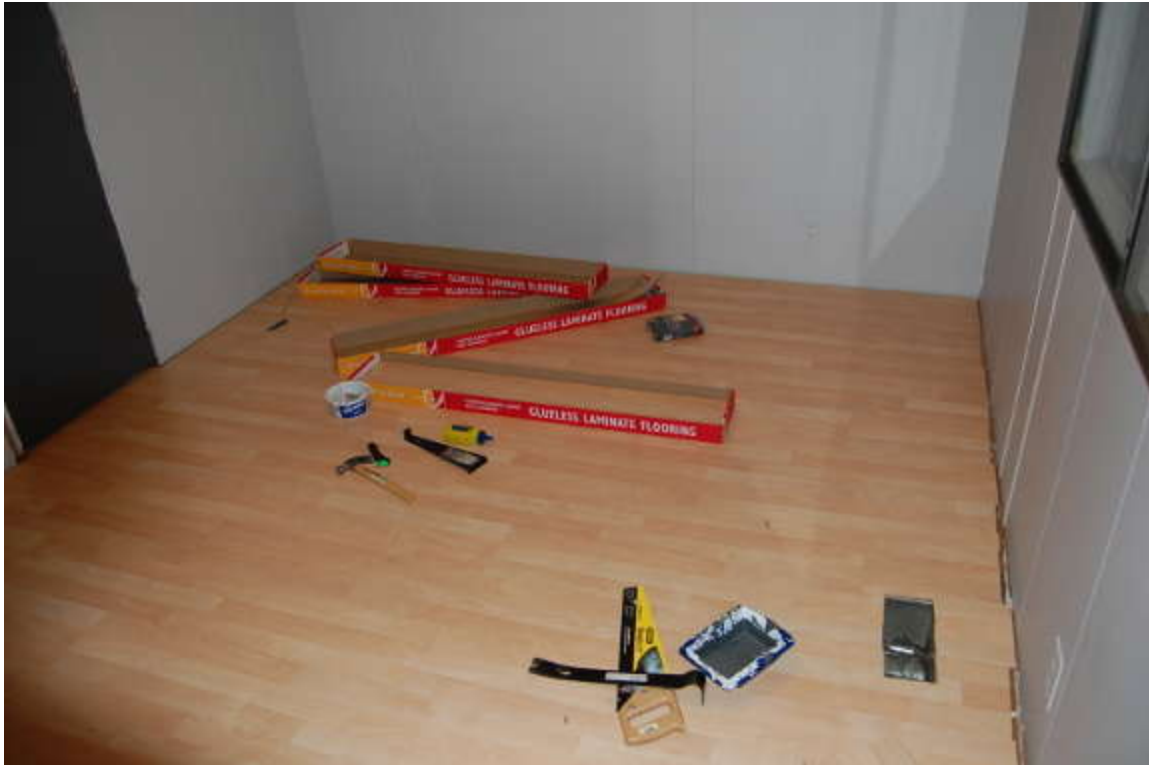
Jonathan and Andrea Combs are thirty-somethings who left the city, using a trailer as a stepping stone on their journey. "We spent the first 10 years of our married life living in various rented apartments, a townhouse, and even one 'real' house," Andrea explained. "We had decided that the city we were living in was getting too big and to live a more sustainable life, and for our sanity, we needed to get out into the 'country'. We soon realized that finding both a house and a piece of land that we liked together was going to be impossible. So we decided to focus on the land and build a house."

"Andrea had previously indicated that she was not interested in living in a trailer, but when we decided to move to the country, it seemed like a good option and she agreed," Jonathan chimed in.

"Building a house was going to take time, and even longer if we were not living on site," continued Andrea. "We looked into small pre-built sheds, yurts, small cabins, etc. But none seemed right for our lifestyle and environment. So we decided to buy a trailer, live in it till we found land and had the trailer paid off, then move it to the land."



*Jonathan and Andrea tore out the carpeting...*



*...and added laminate flooring and a paint job to improve the interior space.*

The duo found the perfect trailer for \$8,000 in a trailer park with a lot fee of \$215 per month. The 1982 model was old but in good condition, with 924 square feet of interior space broken up into two bedrooms, two baths, a kitchen, and a sunken living room.



*Rather than building on their new property right away, the couple was able to transfer their trailer to its new location and move in.*

Jonathan and Andrea appreciated the ability to move out of their apartment and into the trailer immediately. Two years later, the perfect 32-acre property came along and they spent an additional \$12,000 having a spot graded for the trailer on their new land, installing a septic tank, and having the trailer delivered and set up. "[The trailer] allowed us to save money on housing while we searched for the property," Jonathan said, "and now allows us to take our time with choosing the spot on our property for building the type of home we wish to construct, while also allowing us to build at our own pace."

### **Energy efficiency**

"I feel it is better to be reusing a home than to build a traditional house," Andrea said. "We still hope to build a natural home someday. But even then we will use the trailer as a guest house or a house for my in-laws."

"The primary reason for wanting to build a house is the increased



efficiency, especially of a house designed with passive-solar principles," Jonathan added. "If comparing homes of equal size, I would say a trailer is probably worse for the environment, as a traditional house should provide increased energy efficiency and should last longer. However, trailers do have several environmental advantages, in my opinion.

"First is that most are smaller than the average house. Second is that a trailer can be moved to a new location if desired rather than torn down and replaced if the owners of the land want something different. Lastly, due to the shape and layout of a single-wide trailer, it is easier to use natural lighting throughout the house, and to get some added heat from southern windows. This isn't as easy with wider houses, or houses with rooms separated from southern windows by a wall."



*Changing the orientation of the trailer and adding a porch to shade the largest window in the summer increased the thermal efficiency of Jonathan and Andrea's trailer.*



While waiting for a more traditional house to materialize in their minds (and wallets), Jonathan and Andrea are still finding ways to make their trailer more energy efficient. When they moved their home out of the trailer park, they reoriented the structure so that the long side with the largest window faced south for passive solar heating in the winter. A porch roof on that side prevents summer sun from baking the trailer.

The new orientation also corrected a problem the pair noticed in the trailer park, where the south-facing bedroom "would get incredibly hot during the daytime." That bedroom now points east, so they enjoy morning sun but the space doesn't heat up unduly during the day.

Andrea, who is "an avid crafter and upcycler," made insulative coverings for many of the windows, which she reports really help with heating and cooling. "We replaced the appliances with energy-star-rated ones," she adds, rounding out their low cost, but effective, energy improvements.

**Would you take a dream home?**



*An artistic paint job spices up the master bedroom.*

I asked each of the interviewed trailer-dwellers the same question: "If you were offered a 'dream home', at least the American average of 2,700 square feet, brand new, for free (but you would be responsible for taxes, upkeep, etc., and couldn't just sell it and live on the proceeds), would you take it?" Unsurprisingly, many would have leapt at the hypothetical offer, but Andrea and Jonathan were mo@ck they re hesitant.

"For me that would all come down to the location," Andrea responded. "If it were in a subdivision in a city, no way. If it were to be installed on my lot, I might."

Jonathan was even more leery. "If it were a standard house, then no, I would not take it. Especially if it were located in a subdivision. Even if the house would be built on my own property, I would not take it, as part of the reason for choosing to live in a trailer was to give us the flexibility to build our own dream house. If the dream home could be built to my

specifications, and could be significantly smaller than the 2,700 square feet, I would take it, but otherwise I prefer living in the trailer until we can build what we want."

### **Social consequences and advice for others**



*The stepping stone trailer is a pleasant home for now.*

Although Andrea and Jonathan are aware of the stigma attached to trailer dwelling, neither felt that their housing choice impacted their life in any way. "I gave up worrying about what my family thought of me when I quit a good job to stay at home," Andrea said. "This is just another in the long list of reasons they think I am odd." In fact, she enjoyed the way the trailer "forces us to live simply, deliberately, thinking about what we have, what we need."

"If living in a trailer is a stepping stone to living your dream life, do not let

the perception of others keep you from achieving that dream," Jonathan admonished. Those of us interested in living a more deliberate life would do well to follow his lead.

To read more about Jonathan and Andrea's adventures, visit Jonathan's blog at [www.simplelivingcomplexworld.blogspot.com](http://www.simplelivingcomplexworld.blogspot.com).

# The ugly-duckling property

Jonathan and Andrea's story suggests another reason for a potential homesteader to choose the trailer life—flexibility. Although urban homesteading has its own appeal, many wannabe farmers dream of finding a rural acreage where they can spread out, plant trees, graze sheep, and do as they wish. If you don't already live in the region where you want to settle, though, the hunt for land can be expensive and time-consuming. Why not buy a cheap trailer nearby to expedite your land search, then move your house onto your new farm as a starter dwelling, or as your permanent accommodation?

Although the hunt for property is really beyond the scope of this book, I can't resist making a few suggestions you aren't likely to hear anywhere else. In this case, my advice can be boiled down to the following—choose an ugly-duckling property. You will probably have a very specific vision by the time you reach the land-hunting stage, and for many of us that vision includes a well-insulated but quirky house, extensive pastures, a mature orchard, a pastoral view, and so forth. However, most new homesteaders aren't actually ready to dive into a fully-formed farm freedom to . ' and will instead discover that their beautiful property turns into an exhausting place to spend all weekend mowing, interspersed with long hours working in town to pay down the mortgage.

On the other hand, if you apply the same simple-living philosophy to your land search as you did to your housing search, you may be able to purchase a less-than-perfect property outright, quit your job, and devote your time to building your homesteading paradise. As the ugly-duckling property fledges into a beautiful swan, you will have the added bonus of knowing that it follows your own template at your own pace, rather than someone else's.

The trick to selecting an ugly-duckling property that doesn't stay ugly forever is figuring out which major inconveniences you can live with and even enjoy, and which ones are real deal breakers. Each imperfection you accept will not only mean a lower asking price, but will almost certainly



equate to lower property taxes later. Here are some ideas:



*Although we usually opt to stay home when the floodwaters rise, sometimes we're forced to gear up or strip down to get across.*

**Problematic access.** To reach our farm, you have to walk through a third of a mile of floodplain, which includes a creek crossing that floods over my head a few times a year. Rather than spending tens of thousands of dollars hauling in rock to firm up the ground, we usually walk from our cars to the trailer, or drive an electric golf cart to haul supplies if the weather is dry enough to allow passage. Although our access can be a bit of a headache at times, it also reminds us not to buy too much stuff, and the walk home clears our minds and immerses us back into the farm's beauty after a trip to town. We never get door-to-door salesmen or Jehovah's witnesses, and we're confident that anyone who braves our moat really wants to see us. Overall, my husband and



I agree that this inconvenience is a benefit, and not just because it knocked several thousand dollars off the land's asking price.

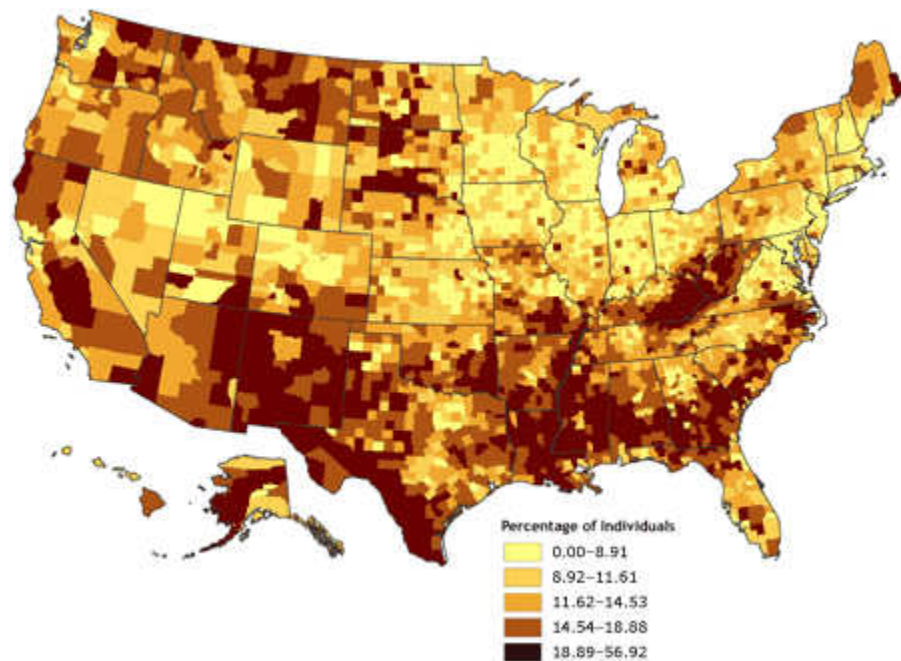
**Right-of-way.** This is really a subset of the problematic access point above, but refers to a specific situation in which the property you buy has no road frontage but comes with permission to drive across a neighbor's land to reach your own. Our property has this issue as well, and it caused some problems in the beginning when the neighbor in question wasn't sure about these strangers moving in on the other side of his hayfield. If you ensure that the right-of-way is well documented in the deed (preferably with a map and with the width listed) and then act like good neighbors, a right-of-way can become only a minor inconvenience in time.

**Unofficial neighborhood codes.** You probably won't find many official neighborhood covenants out in rural areas, but you are likely to get pressure from your neighbors to conform to their standards if everyone else has a perfectly manicured lawn. At the other extreme, certain subsets of back-to-the-landers might be annoyed every time they drive home if the neighborhood code runs toward the opposite extreme, with junked cars in the front yard and grass above your head. Personally, I prefer the latter scenario since it means I'll be able to try to spend more time ovliving in a whatever crazy permaculture notions flit through my mind (and since property taxes are considerably lower in that type of area), but to many homesteaders, junked cars in the neighborhood would be a sign of an ugly-duckling property. On the other hand, if you're interested in green building techniques or want to install a composting toilet, keep in mind that the more manicured neighborhoods are also much more likely to adhere strictly to local building codes.

**Run-down farmland.** A well-managed farm, with good fences, solidly-vegetated pastures, and rich garden soil is bound to have a higher asking price than the farm that has been abandoned for decades and has reverted to briars. As a new homesteader, though, I think you're better off with the latter, not only to save money, but also to rein in your enthusiasm to manageable levels. Despite having 58 acres to

play with, six years into our homesteading adventure, we currently farm only a bit more than an acre and that keeps us plenty busy. Brush can be cleared away and organic matter can be added back to eroded soil, but if you step into ten acres of paradise, you won't have time to do anything except keep the pastures open. Traditionally-managed properties are also much more likely to be full of pesticide and herbicide residue than their neglected counterparts. Again, price isn't the only reason to choose the ugly-duckling property.

**Utilities.** Farms that have water, sewer, phone, internet, and electric ready for hookup are going to cost much more than those with none of the above. On the other hand, depending on how carefully you adhere to building codes, you may spend an arm and a leg developing systems of your own if these are not in place. See the "Basic facilities" section at the end of this chapter for more information.



*Poverty-stricken areas are good spots to find cheap land. On the map above, darker areas have a higher percentage of the population living below the poverty line. (Map courtesy of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.gov/PCD/issues/2007/oct/07\\_0091.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/PCD/issues/2007/oct/07_0091.htm).)*

**Wealth of the region.** The obvious way to find an ugly-duckling property is to look for economically-depressed parts of the country (or world). Here in Appalachia, my problematic land went for \$600 per acre in 2003, and similarly cheap farms are still available. As usual, there's a tradeoff—poor areas have no high-paying jobs within driving distance, and it's hard to create a local business because your neighbors live below the poverty line. However, if you're willing to leverage the power of the internet to peddle your wares to a wealthier audience elsewhere, you can make a good living no matter where you're located, bringing much-needed dollars into the local economy in the process. (See my ebook *Microbusiness Independence* for more information.)

One final caveat: it may not be worth moving all the way across the country to find cheap land if all the people you care about will be more than a day's drive away; homesteading works best with a strong support network.

**Proximity to town.** The closer you are to a town, especially one with a larger, wealthier population, the more your land will cost per acre.

Even if jobs aren't an issue, you're going to have to decide whether you're willing to drive an hour and a half energy-star appliances to the big city when you want to find fancier grocery items or to reach a movie theater, library, bar, or music establishment of your choice. Finally, distance from a large city can be even trickier if you don't have an existing partner because the rural dating scene may be dicey. On the other hand, sociable people living in a woodland paradise often find innovative ways to tempt their friends into come to them, and you may find you don't miss big-city entertainment options when your life is more fulfilling.

**Lay of the land.** In addition to creating access issues, the landscape of your farm can affect your ability to catch the sun's rays, with solar panels or passive solar; will determine whether you have plentiful water for irrigation; and will impact how easy it is to grade a flat home site. You might also consider wind, frost pockets, invasive plants, and whether the mineral rights to your property are owned by someone else. These are characteristics that I recommend not compromising on if you can help it—our north-facing aspect causes problems that are

much harder to fix than eroded soil, while, on the other hand, our copious supply of water greatly simplifies gardening.

This is a far from comprehensive list, but I hope it gets you thinking about which ugly-duckling features you are and aren't willing to put up with. My uncompromising points were that I wanted a large creek and lots of land without problematic invasive species, so I put up with a long drive to the nearest city, an economically-depressed region, and our problematic access.

Nine years later, our ugly-duckling property has turned out to be nearly perfect, and as a bonus, property taxes come in right around \$25 per month.

Now that's a housing cost I can afford!

# Moving and installing a trailer



*Trailer-hauling companies have the proper equipment and know local regulations for moving your trailer.*

Unless you own a tractor trailer, moving your mobile home to its new location is one of the few tasks that you will definitely want to farm out to the experts. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, the distance you have to move your trailer will determine how much this endeavor costs—expect to spend at least \$200 per hour paying a trailer-moving company to get your new home into place. The good news is that trailer-hauling companies are quite adept at getting mobile homes into the most remote locations, whether that's on top of a mountain or across a river.

Assuming you're buying (or being given) an old, ramshackle trailer, you can save some cash by preparing it to be moved yourself. Remove any skirting from around the base (and take the materials with you—they might be



reusable); unhook electric, gas, and water lines; and secure furniture and doors so they won't shift or break during travel. If your trailer is as decrepit as ours was, use two by fours to form an X over window or door openings, which will prevent the frame of the trailer from distorting during the move. Finally, make sure the axles and wheels are still attached (if not, you'll need to rent some), then pump up the tires and replace any that don't hold air.



*If you're moving into a remote location, your crew will probably transfer the mobile home from a tractor trailer to a bulldozer once they leave the road.*

With the exception of travel trailers, mobile homes are too large to be pulled behind even a hefty pickup truck, so after preparing for the move, you'll need to leave the next part to the pros and their tractor trailer. Your trailer-hauling service should be on top of any local permitting and insurance issues along with requirements for including "wide load" signage and warning vehicles in your entourage.

This is also the time to decide whether you want to pay extra to have the



new house site graded. Although it's relatively easy for your movers to jack the trailer up so it's level on uneven ground, your trailer may last longer if they use a bulldozer to create a flat, raised pad so that water drains away from the trailer on every side.



*Tiedowns can be a DIY project, but check local building codes.*

Installation will probably also be left to the pros since they need large jacks to get the trailer up on cinderblock piers. You'll want to purchase tiedowns, which are simply long metal screws that you twist into the ground and attach to your trailer with metal straps to prevent the wind from blowing your home away. Within hours, your trailer could be ready to move into!

## Basic facilities

If you're moving into a well-populated area such as a trailer park or suburb, chances are you'll be required to hook into existing utility lines, including sewer, water, and electricity. But if you're trailersteading back in the boondocks, some or all of these facilities will be left up to your discretion. Assuming you're willing to skimp and build things yourself, you might end up with a more environmentally friendly system for a fraction of the cost.

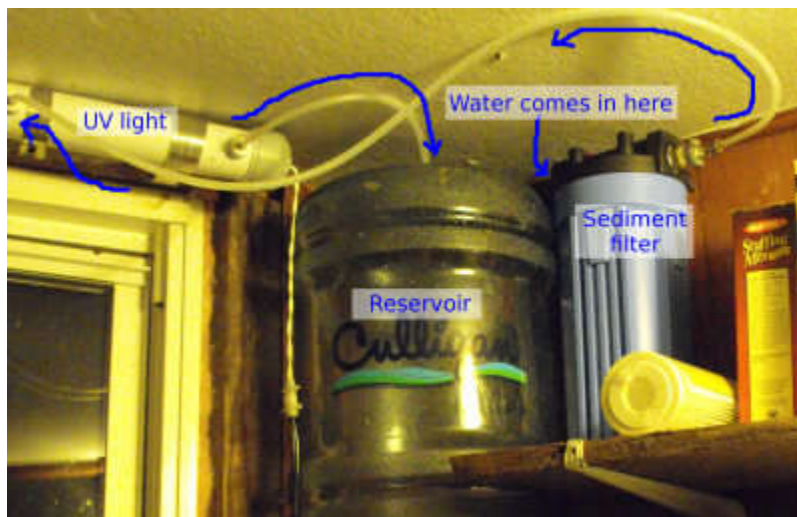


*Our composting toilet system combines features of outhouses (you never have to touch your feces) with the hot-composting method outlined in The Humanure Handbook.*

For example, most areas require a health-department-approved septic system before you can connect to the electric grid. But if you want to do without electricity or already have electricity on the property, chances are the authorities will ignore your composting toilet until and unless they get

complaints from your neighbors. Similarly, if there's an outhouse on your property already, the alternative method of sewage management may be grandfathered in (but you'll want to improve the system to protect the groundwater). John Jenkins' *The Humanure Handbook* (which you can read online for free at [humanurehandbook.com/contents.html](http://humanurehandbook.com/contents.html)) provides tips for building and managing a hot-composting system that kills disease-causing microorganisms.

Trailer dwellers are also in a prime position for cobbling together simple greywater systems since the building's water pipes are all exposed underneath the frame of your mobile home. Art Ludwig's *Create an Oasis with Greywater* is an excellent resource for understanding the ecological benefits of keeping wash water that's not contaminated with fecal bacteria out of the normal waste stream, and he also explains how to use greywater in your garden.



*If you have a source of chemical-free and moderately-clean water, a sediment filter and UV light may be all you need to filter your drinking water. This type of water can be used without treatment for washing.*

Drilling a well is an expensive undertaking, but if you don't have to jump through health-department hoops (for the reasons outlined above), a shallow hand-dug well or boxed-in spring might be permissible. Both of these types of low-tech water systems typically contain small amount of coliform bacteria, but you can treat this mostly-clean water quite easily with a low cost sediment filter and ultraviolet light combination. If you really

want to trailerstead on the cheap, you can also repeat our early adventure of carrying drinking water home from public springs and friends' houses—if needed, we can use only about a gallon of water per person per day for drinking and rinsing off fresh produce, so carting in that potable water isn't terribly arduous.

Although I'm a fan of making your own sewage and water systems, I'm less keen on homegrown electricity since small-scale green energy solutions tend to cost more than they save. It can definitely feel satisfying to be off the grid using your own solar panels, hydropower, or windmill, but you might be better off financially to stay connected. The exception, once again, is do-it-yourself systems, especially those cobbled together out of used parts. (See the profile "An incognito trailer" for one example.)

All of these choices aside, you might as well allot the cash to hook your trailer up right if you're the type of person who's going to lie awake at night and wait for the authorities to discover your sidesteps of the law.

Unfortunately, developing basic facilities that are up to code can be even more expensive than moving your trailer into place. For example, Sara and Seth (profiled in the next section) spent \$6,000 installing a septic tank and well, and we paid our electric company nearly \$1,300 for hookup despite erecting our own pole and wiring our own box rather than paying an electrician. Even with these figures included, though, installing a trailer is drastically cheaper than building or buying a similarly-sized house.



# Case study: Starter home for a young family

## Farming from a trailer



*"I've wanted to be a farmcrazy, cobbled-together, split-levelerso for most of my life.... Living on this property has given me lots of learning opportunities."*

Sara McDonald lives in a mobile home in southeast Louisiana with her husband Seth, their four-year-old son, a dog, and a cat. Sara's mother gave them a place to stay in Virginia for about a year after their child was born, but Seth and Sara soon chose to move down to vacant land in Louisiana that was in Seth's family.



*A trailer was a shortcut to moving onto a piece of vacant land in her husband's family, where Sara now has room to experiment.*

"I never wanted to work a full-time job away from home," explained Sara.

"I've wanted to be a farmer most of my life, and while I wouldn't classify myself as a farmer today, living on this property has given me a lot of learning opportunities. I've spent a lot of time foraging for mushrooms and wild plants, planting new trees in the pastures, and starting a small orchard. This is possible because of where we live, but also because I don't feel like I have to work at a day job all day just to survive. I actually quit my job recently, reducing our income by over 50%. Since we've paid off the loans to buy and set up the trailer, I wasn't nearly as stressed out about leaving my



job as I might have been otherwise. I feel like I'm incredibly fortunate."

### **Family reaction to the trailer life**



*Sara reports that trailers are considered acceptable starter homes for young families in her area.*

Sara and Seth were lucky to have the support of most of their family when it came time to make housing decisions. An old farmhouse stood on the land they ultimately moved onto but "there was a lot of opposition to our insistence on moving back into the old house. Ultimately, if we wanted to live on the family property, we would have to build a new house or move into a trailer. That pretty much decided it for us. We didn't want to spend the time and money to build a house right away. I was also hesitant to spend a lot of money on new building materials. It seems like a waste when there are so many decent dwellings sitting around empty. A recycled dwelling seemed like a good idea. It's more consistent with my values, and

it was cost-effective."



*Aid from family has made Sara and Seth's journey much easier. For example, Sara's mother recently helped the couple begin to repaint their kitchen.*

Seth's family and Sara's father had plenty of experience with trailers. "Seth lived in a trailer most of his life, and his mom was really supportive of our decision," Sara said, going on to note that Seth's mother had recently sold her trailer for \$3,000 more than she'd invested in it "casting some doubt on the common belief that trailers always depreciate." Sara's father came from the mountainous regions of Virginia where "most of my younger cousins who are just starting out consider themselves lucky if they have a trailer to live in, even living in trailer parks." Even though Sara herself had grown up in apartments, her mother had "always yearned for ownership, so she was happy that we'd actually own something and be on our own property."

"I think people in the south have negative biases against trailers, but they

also tend to accept them as an option for people in certain life stages," Sara explained. "Being a young family in a rural area or small town, a trailer is a fairly acceptable 'starter home.' I think retirees are also afforded some leniency when it comes to trailer stereotypes."

"Seth's dad is the only one who really seems kind of uneasy with the idea of us living in a trailer long-term." Sara seemed to find this small amount of resistance amusing, noting that her father-in-law is also the only one of their parents who currently lives in a travel trailer. "He always tells us we need a real house, and that we shouldn't have to live in this thing forever. Of course, he's the one who found it for us, but I think he was just eager to have us move back to Louisiana. "

### **Trailer concerns**



*Keeping her son safe from fires tops Sara's list of concerns about living in a mobile home.*

Although Sara's analysis of her living arrangement was very positive overall, she did have some major concerns. Foremost was fire, which she explains is "one reason my son sleeps in the bedroom with my husband and me. He has his own little bed in our room, and it's because I don't want to even risk being separated from him by fire. The furnace is between our bedroom and the second bedroom so it just seems too risky to me."

Due to their hurricane-prone location, she also worries about the mobile home being blown away. "Our trailer went through Katrina, Rita, Gustav and most recently Isaac, without any issues at all. It gives me some sense of security for our belongings, but I still would not want to stay in it during a big storm." She's considering erecting "some kind of small wind shelter" to give the family a place to retreat to during high winds. "I've looked at FEMA safe building plans that were priced at around \$7,500 for wood with steel reinforcement, and about \$11,000 to \$13,000 for concrete and steel buildings that are 8x14. We are also considering a sturdy port-like structure over the trailer since we will need to replace our roof soon, and I'd like to design it in a way that strengthens the whole building against wind. So far, I have found conflicting research on this, and some of the research shows that modifications can make the building more vulnerable to wind damage, so I'm holding off for now."





*"Most of my attempts to reduce energy costs come in the form of strategic plantings around the house," said Sara. "Our trees are finally growing tall enough to provide a decent amount of shade to the southern and western walls freedom to . ' in the summer."*

Since Sara is environmentally conscious, she also dislikes the amount of energy required to heat and cool their home. She and her husband spend an average of \$70 per month on energy, which includes both electric heat and cooling. On the other hand, she notes that "the apartment I lived in [before moving into the trailer] was maybe \$30 less a month during the middle of the summer, and about the same during fall and spring. That's maybe a total of \$200 a year more that we spend in the trailer, but it is well offset by the lack of other bills and payments we have to make."

### **Inexpensive living**





*Living in a trailer has recently given Sara the opportunity to be a stay-at-home mom.*

The biggest advantage of living in a mobile home for Sara's family has been the low housing costs. "We paid \$15,500 with a 5 year loan, about 4.5% interest, which turned out to be payments of about \$280 a month. A couple years earlier, I was paying the same amount for my share of the rent in an apartment that I shared with a roommate, so it was nice that I'd actually own something at the end of 5 years," Sara said, putting the cost in perspective.

In addition to the price of the trailer, Sara and Seth spent another \$6,000 to improve the property and prepare for the trailer with a septic tank and well, then a final \$1,000 to have the trailer delivered and installed. Now that the loan and setup costs are paid off, though, the family is able to live on less than \$1,000 per month "and that includes student loan debt and emergency health insurance."



*"It's pleasant and it's cheap," Sara said about her mobile home. "It's like a blank slate. It seems more malleable than a house, and a lot more DIY projects are possible."*

"If we had to build a house here we probably couldn't afford it for at least another 20 years unless we wanted to go into serious debt," Sara noted.

"The trailer has definitely made it possible for us to live in a nice location on a fairly large property (20 acres).

"The mobile part of the 'mobile home' is also a nice perk. We own one acre, but since the rest of the land around us is family land and will eventually be subdivided and possibly sold, we may want to move somewhere else in the future. Being able to pack up our home and take it with us is a comforting notion (though I won't be able to take my gardens!).

"On a philosophical note, I really sympathize with people who are having trouble finding decent housing during the current economic crisis. I think it's a shame that our society so eagerly embraced expensive housing on the

premise that house values appreciate indefinitely and you'll always get some return on your investment. What a waste. That part of the 'American Dream' has driven so many people to financial ruin and it has made housing so unaffordable that a pea pitched roof to a mobile home is doable can scarcely even consider owning a home before they are at least five years into a steady career—and then only when they are willing to take on the major debt of a mortgage. To actually own a traditional home outright (especially a new construction) seems like a distant dream that will never come true for a lot of people."

To read more about Sara's adventures, visit her blog at [www.wildhomestead.org](http://www.wildhomestead.org). Her ebooks include *A 10-Acre Permaculture Project* and *One Acre Homestead*, both of which are available on Amazon.

# **Remodeling a trailer**

## **Trailer overhauls**

In the summer of 2012, Mark and I were lucky to discover a local carpenter who has remodeled and overhauled dozens of mobile homes over the last decade (as well as building and fixing up an equal number of traditional houses). I sat down with Bradley and asked him about the most common ailments of the trailer.

"A trailer ain't worth a dime," Bradley declared. Although he lives in a mobile home himself, he considers them under-built and dangerous, with walls constructed from two by twos (instead of two by fours) and with far too many electrical outlets per breaker. "They're built in a hurry for mass production," he explained, "And nothing is level or built out of real wood."





*A leaky roof caused plenty of problems early in our trailer adventure. Here, Mark is replacing wet insulation after sealing a crack between sheets of roofing metal.*

"So how do people make a trailer more liveable?" I asked.

Bradley noted that the first thing many mobile-home dwellers want updated is the roof. A later section will cover our own roofing adventure, including additional ceiling insulation, so we'll skip that for now.

Next comes re-insulation, both in the new roof and in the walls. Bradley takes off the siding and re-frames the walls with two by fours or two by



sixes to create a larger cavity for wall insulation. Afterward, the siding can be screwed back in place, or you can upgrade to house-style vinyl siding. The more eco-conscious trailer-dweller might consider using straw-bale or cob construction to insulate the walls instead, or you can go a more expensive but easier route by using rigid sheets of foam insulation as is shown below.



*David, one of the mobile-home dwellers who will be profiled in a later section, opted to add two layers of inch-thick rigid foam board (polyisocyanurate) insulation to the outside of his trailer rather than restudding his walls energy-star appliances* throughl. He coated the rigid insulation with half-inch sheets of plywood (and plans to eventually add vinyl siding) for a final wall insulation value of R26. Since David scrounged for supplies and found them on sale, he was able to re-insulate the walls, upgrade the ceiling insulation from R19 to R60, and add insulation to the basement, all for about \$500.

Insulation under the floor often needs to be replaced as well. Bradley explained that the old insulation is usually held in place by black netting (although in our 1960s era trailer, there was instead a type of particle board holding the insulation up against the floor). Bradley removes and throws away the netting, pushes R19 insulation up between the floor joists, and then adds a synthetic underlayment, which is a breathable fiberglass-embedded fabric.

Older trailers are actually better off in the floor department, but after about 1988, manufacturers began building with pressed sawdust board that eventually rots through. Bradley explained that the floors often need to be re-studded around the sinks and toilet, then he replaces the particle board with a water-resistant OSB board. Advantech is his preferred brand since it's rated to sit out in the weather for at least six months without breaking down, and comes with a 40 year warranty under regular use.

"What's the next most common request?" I asked.

"Windows and doors," Bradley replied, explaining that the single-glazed windows that come in trailers leak cold air in the winter. "Then cabinets and general interior remodeling. After about ten or fifteen years, you basically have to rebuild a trailer one room at a time." He explained that vents start to leak and the electrical wiring and plumbing need to be repaired or replaced. In addition, the roof may let rain through if you don't mop on a sealer every three to five years (assuming you didn't top your trailer with a new roof).



*Jonathan, profiled in the case study "Trailer park to woodland paradise," had an ingenious, cheap, and energy-efficient solution to skirting his trailer.*

*"The panels we used are waste products from the manufacture of exterior doors," he explained. "The solid doors are constructed first, then an opening is cut out for any glass that will be installed, leaving a rectangular piece of unused material.*

*"There is a location near us that sells these panels. The panels we used are approximately 20" x 36" and consist of a foam center covered with painted aluminum or fiberglass on the front and back. We cut them to the desired length, dug a shallow trench for the bottom of the panel to sit in, then screwed them in place and raked dirt back up around the bottom, both inside and out, to hold the bottom in place."*

*He noted that the materials used to skirt his 14-by-70-foot single-wide cost \$325, which is similar to the price of vinyl skirting. "I believe this has had*

*a significant impact on heating and cooling," he noted.*  
*erso*

Then there are the underpinnings (or skirting). Since a trailer is basically a house on wheels, most homeowners opt to close in the area between the outside walls and the ground. Adding a skirt of material around the bottom of the mobile home keeps cold air from blowing right under your trailer in the winter (which means the floor is warmer and your heating bill is lower), and generally makes a mobile home fit better into a more upscale neighborhood.

Although many trailer dwellers have been choosing vinyl siding recently, Bradley notes that the materials only last about three years. His favorite underpinning is galvanized, which can last 30 to 40 years (although it might need paint after about 10 years). In our area in 2012, galvanized underpinnings cost about \$7 for a 3 foot by 5 foot sheet.

A more expensive option is to skip the skirting and put your trailer up on a real cinderblock foundation. This is a much more permanent alternative, so you won't want to spend the money if there's a chance you might want to move your trailer someday, but the cinderblocks do help support the trailer and prevent bowing of the floor over time. Rebecca (profiled in the case study "Hiding in the vegetation") reported that her husband built a foundation under their single-wide with small bump-out for under \$1,000, although she admits that he "used quite a bit of materials he had on hand" and that "the cost of concrete has doubled since then." As you'll see in the next case study, David's full basement came in around \$9,000.

Although all of this information may make you wonder why you'd live in a structure that needs so much attention, free or cheap trailers can save you a lot of money since you can remodel slowly over time rather than falling into debt to start out in a house. As Mark and I have discovered, a trailer is extremely forgiving of know-nothing DIYers, and it feels a bit like building with legos to unscrew the siding, frame up a wall of double-glazed windows, and suddenly have a completely new living space. Keep reading for tips on cheap and easy ways to turn your trailer into a comfortable home.





# Case study: An incognito trailer

## Hidden in plain sight



*David and Mary's beautiful home is built around a 1974 trailer.*

"I almost never tell anyone that we live in a trailer because, with a normal gable roof and a full basement, we both consider it a normal stick-built house," David said. "Although if a visitor happens to mention that we have a very nice place, I will then tell them it was at one time a 'mobile home' now converted to real estate."



*Mary and David in 1993. David said, "I basically look the same now, just less hair."*

Over the past three decades, Mary and David have created annual energy bills in a vibrant homestead, due in part to the low cost of their initial housing choice. What I enjoyed most about David's story is that he and his wife both worked blue-collar jobs, but they didn't have to wait until they struck it rich or retired to start homesteading. You may find the in-depth information on renovating a mobile home equally inspiring.

**Pulling themselves up by their bootstraps**



*David and Mary in 1974.*

Mary and David met in 1973 at a Beach Boy concert in Youngstown, Ohio. "I worked in a steel processing plant as a industrial electrician, while Mary worked at an aluminum extrusion plant in office accounting," David said.

The pair saved their pennies and bought a 1974 14-by-60-foot mobile home for \$5,000 soon after getting married in 1979. But "life was not very good in a mobile home park. Kids yelling, doors banging, engines revving, lawn mowers without mufflers, and the neighbors thought we were standoffish when we were just working a regular job and coming home tired after a hard day at work," David remembered.

He dreamed of buying a piece of land in the country, and two years later they made that dream a reality when they found seven acres of wooded land within their price range. Unfortunately, some stormy waters were ahead. "This was 1981," David said. "Inflation was running wild, prime interest rates were 18% to 20%. Big time recession, and after signing a three year land contract and moving our house to the property, our union went on

strike."

"With so many people out of work because of the recession, I just couldn't find a job anywhere unless we were willing to move out of the area, which some people call the 'rust belt' because of the steel mills closing in 1975. Moving from the area was not a option—Mary was still employed with her company—so we would just have to watch our money closely and make do with less."

As you'll see, David and Mary made do very well, turning their trailer into a modern home a bit at a time as they could afford the cash. Now David feels lucky to live where he does. "We have our savings and investments, produce most of our own power, produce some of our own food, and we owe no man nothing." What better argument could there be for trailersteading?

## **Turning a trailer into a home**





*David working on his mobile home in its new location.*

David and Mary had a lot of work ahead of them before they could rest on their laurels, and they were well aware of the disadvantages of the cheap housing option. "The construction of our mobile home was typical for the time period, corrugated aluminum siding, metal roof, marginal wall insulation because it was less than 2x4 stud construction, paneling for inside walls, single-pane windows that leaked air like a sieve (and froze over to spend more time over in the winter), cardboard doors (no joke), hollow plastic doors on kitchen cabinets (which held up extremely well over the years), shag carpeting, chrome-plated plastic faucets, and what looked like a 15 to 20 gallon hot-water tank. (We ran out of hot water a lot.) I will say



this, even though everything was cheap construction, for the most part everything was in good condition, neat, clean, and organized, and that is the way we kept it for a long time."

With the help of family, neighbors, and contractors, David and Mary began improving their trailer when they could afford each step. The land they moved to had a septic tank and "something that resembled a driveway", but it took \$350 to hire a bulldozer, the neighbor, and his son to get the mobile home placed on foundation blocks David had installed. Later, David was able to put in the electrical entrance cable, used a rented backhoe to attach the trailer to the septic tank, and performed the plumbing himself, but he had to hire in a well driller and gravel truck to provide water and access to the land.



*Their first major improvement was to contract out a pitched roof added onto their mobile home.*

At this point, David was back at work, and by 1985, he and Mary had saved enough to hire a cousin to add a roof onto their trailer and to pour loose

insulation into the attic.



*Building a full basement cost \$9,000 in 1985 or 1986.*



*First, they constructed the basement out of cinderblocks.*





*Then they slid the mobile home on top using I beams.*

A year or two later, they built a basement below the trailer, then hired a contractor to install double-glazed windows and redwood siding.



*Hunting around until they found a good deal on cheap insulation made it possible to upgrade the energy efficiency of their home. These unfaced fiberglass rolls of insulation were manufacturer surplus at \$20 per roll, and the one-inch-thick rigid foam boards cost \$3 to \$9 per sheet "depending on defects."*

"We loved the looks of the siding, but it needed constant maintenance with oil wood preservative," David remembered. Meanwhile "the wood boring bees loved to get behind the aluminum gutters and bore holes into the fascia boards. I wasn't going to let some insect destroy our home. We also wanted more insulation in the walls, and the only way to accomplish that was to put the insulation on the outside."





*Removing the siding exposes the insulation.*

The trailer itself had about three inches of fiberglass insulation in the walls, to which David added foil-faced foam boards for extra heat-holding power. He "taped all the seams with aluminum tape and used special nails to hold the foam board in place."



*Adding rigid insulation to the outside of the wall is an easy way to increase thermal efficiency.*

About the same time, Mary and David hired a contractor to install aluminum fascia under the gutters and on the rakes of the roof, along with vinyl perforated soffit to protect the attic insulation from moisture.



*The redwood siding was beautiful, but labor-intensive.*

"As you can see from these photos, we have come a long way since the original metal-sided, metal-roof trailer that we had before," David said. "You can also see a well-insulated house, but no siding, a large deck, but no railing, no lattice, and most of the decking isn't fastened down."





*David and Mary's home continued to improve over time.*

As with most homesteads, David's and Mary's is still a work in progress. When not improving their home, David keeps busy building an "Amish-style laundry line from BMX bike wheels and stainless-steel wire rope," installing an orchard, digging an irrigation pond, and fencing out deer.

"There are also the small jobs like, trimming trees, mowing grass, working on our car and truck, canning thirty pounds of chicken breast, canning green beans. I think you get the idea."

### **Alternative energy**



*David and Mary's homestead in 2010.*

Every homesteader has a pet project—the real reason they want to live on the land—and David's is clearly alternative energy. He converted their heat source from natural gas to propane and then to wood, focused on insulation to minimize already-lowered heating costs, and then moved on to producing electricity.





*David's first attempt at getting off the grid was a DIY windmill.*

"I wanted to start generating my own power," David wrote. "PV panels were too expensive so I decided to build a wind turbine. I bought a tower and batteries from a scrap yard, gearbox, generator, and most of the other parts and components from the local surplus stores in the area, the propeller hub came from an old DC3 plane, and the blades came out of a cooling tower of a steam generating plant. We didn't have a basement at the time so I bought a old travel trailer and gutted everything out to make room for all of the batteries and power conversion equipment.

"The turbine worked in a fashion. I had no way to control the speed other than loading the generator or turning the brake on, so the use was limited to when we were home, lower wind speeds, or the amount of power we used (very little load if batteries were full). For the most part, my ambitious project just didn't work out, but I kept modifying things trying to make it work."



*David's batteries soon made the move to the new basement.*

By now, the basement was in place, which gave David a place to store his batteries in a more controlled environment. He also decided to branch out into solar panels, especially since he'd found 3-kilowatts' worth for a low price. "They came from a demonstration solar power plant in the south California desert. After being cooked in the sun with concentrating mirrors, they were dumped onto the surplus market. I installed them in 1994. I don't remember the cost, but it was cheap at the time."



*Two rounds of solar panels lowered their electric bill.*

In 2011, more solar panels were added to the roof, this time a 1.6-kilowatt array sold as seconds by [www.sunelec.com](http://www.sunelec.com).



*The solar panels from the other side.*

When asked about prices, David was vague—he didn't keep track, but knows he got a good deal. "Almost everything we buy, build, install, is seconds," David explained. "We live in the world of surplus."

### **Putting the money into a house instead**





*Today, the trailer is hidden inside David and Mary's modern home.*

Many people argue that it doesn't make sense to put large amounts of cash into a mobile home. If you're going to spend that kind of about the disadvantages of t they money, why not simply build or buy a stick-built house that is high quality from the get-go? I put this devil's advocate question to each of the folks we interviewed, and I found David's answer to be the most thought-provoking.





*David's energy-star appliances upgraded the efficiency of his kitchen.*

"If we had bought a big fancy house with a big mortgage instead of the trailer, we probably would have lost it back to the bank because, two weeks after moving the trailer to our new property, I lost my job and was out of work for two years because of the bad economy," David said. "So living in a pre-made structure with wood heat and land contract was cheap living again."

"So let's say after two years I get back to work and money is flowing again, so we decide to build, or contract out the construction of a new house while we lived in the trailer. Would the house be what we wanted, or would it be what we thought we wanted? Would it be 2x6 or 2x4 walls, would the house be too small or too large, would the house be facing south or would we have made the mistake and faced it the wrong direction, would the interior be laid out in a logical manner or would we had followed the contractor/architect's advice and regretted the decision for the rest of our lives?"

"If I were to build a house now, I know exactly what I want in a house. I know the type, quality, and placement of windows; I know the thickness of the walls and insulation type; I know the orientation of the structure and placement on the property; I know the roof material; I know on what side of the house utility and low-use rooms should be placed. These are things I

didn't know back 30 years.

"The mobile homes now are much better quality than our 1974 vintage trailer. Young people (or old people) now can buy a mobile home with 2x6 walls and a regular shingled gabled roof, and vinyl siding. I say if a person can find a good quality used mobile home and move it out to their property, that would save them money, time, and effort. Then they can direct their efforts toward something more productive, like a more self-sustainable lifestyle."

# **Adding a pitched roof to a mobile home**





*Our trailer started out with a nearly flat roof that allowed water to puddle on top of sagging tin.*

Although I've learned a lot about building over the last few years, I'm far from a professional, so you'll probably want to seek out a more comprehensive book or expert before you embark on your own trailer renovations. That caveat aside, I thought you might enjoy seeing the choices we made during our recent roofing expedition, since the project highlights some of the unique aspects of trailer repair.



*At the same time we added a new roof, we decided to extend the waterproof area to replace a ramshackle awning over our door with a real porch.*

An earnest DIYer could put a new roof on his or her own trailer, but we opted to hire the same expert who provided the tips for our "Trailer overhauls" section. Bradley has roofed about thirty trailers over the last decade, so we felt confident his techniques would stand the test of time.



Our first choice was whether we wanted to make the roof freestanding (supported by wooden posts that go all the way down to the ground) or whether we would place the new roof directly on top of the trailer. Experts disagree about whether a trailer can handle the weight of a solid roof on its two by two studs, with most folks in very snowy climates opting for the use of piers while people further south often build the roof directly onto the trailer. Bradley has kept an eye on the trailers he roofed without piers and feels they work fine in our climate, so we decided to follow his lead and keep it simple.

We did complicate the project by including a new porch under the same roof. Covered porches can be a bit tricky to add onto trailers if your land is on a slope since the trailer is close to the ground and has a low ceiling. If you're not careful, by the time your porch roof reaches the uphill end, tall folks like my husband will be bumping their heads. By making the new porch roof part of the trailer roof, we were able to decrease the slope of that section and keep the uphill end above head height.



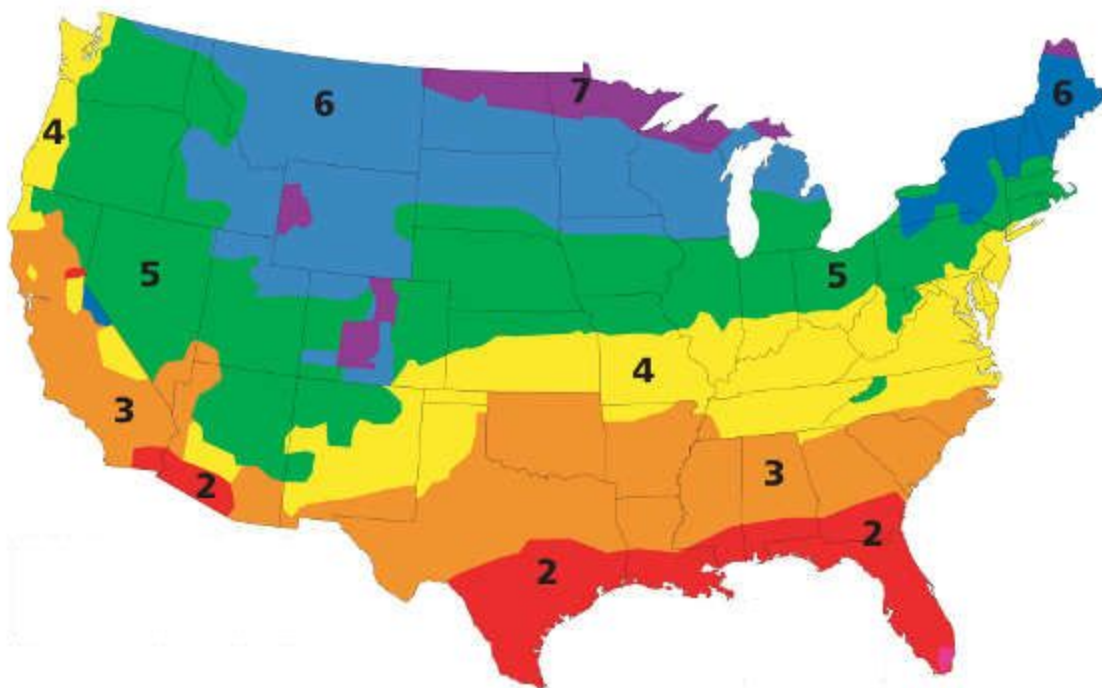
*On larger mobile homes, Bradley usually builds trusses, but on our ten-foot-wide trailer, it was easier to create a pitch by running a two by twelve down the center of the trailer.*

As with any other kind of roof, you'll need to choose between shingles and metal, which will determine the permissible slope (pitch) of the roof. Metal roofing can be much more shallowly pitched—1:12, meaning that the roof rises one inch for every 12 inches of horizontal distance, compared to a minimum pitch of 4:12 for shingles. Since we wanted a shallow pitch, we chose an metal roof, which also gave us the bonus of longevity.

Like pitch and material, the choice of color isn't merely an aesthetic issue.

So-called "cool roofs" (often lighter in color) reflect the energy of the sun during hot summer days, lowering cooling bills by up to 15%. On the other hand, people who live in cold climates may prefer a dark-colored roof that will soak up the sun's energy and help lower heating bills in the winter. Although we live on the dividing line between areas where hot and cool roofs make sense, I choose not to air-condition our trailer, so passive cooling seemed more helpful for reducing the summer "tin can" effect.

Next, we had to choose between building trusses or making a more simple pitched roof based on a center beam. Bradley usually builds trusses for wider trailers, but he felt that our ten-foot-wide trailer could support simple two-by-four rafters on a two-by-twelve beam running down the middle of the trailer. The center-beam method isn't quite as strong and does focus more weight on the middle of the trailer (which is less structurally sound), so it's not recommended on wider buildings.



Existing Wood-Framed Houses

Zone	Add Insulation to Attic		Floor
	Uninsulated Attic	Existing 3-4 Inches of Insulation	
1	R30 to R49	R25 to R30	R13
2	R30 to R60	R25 to R38	R13 to R19
3	R30 to R60	R25 to R38	R19 to R25
4	R30 to R60	R38	R25 to R30
5-8	R49 to R60	R38 to R49	R25 to R30

*The U.S. Department of Energy recommends R30 to R60 attic insulation depending on your location.*

Another factor that went into planning our roof was my wish for more insulation. Although we were primarily adding a roof because our current covering kept springing leaks, I hoped to make the project do double-duty by increasing the thermal efficiency of our trailer. The U.S. Department of Energy recommends at least R30 insulation under roofs in our area, with the table below showing the required cavity depth (open space) for various

types of insulation.

*Minimum cavity depth for fiberglass insulation*

<b>R-value</b>	<b>Minimum cavity depth (inches)</b>
R13	3.5
R19	6
R30	9
R38	12



*Propping the lower end of the rafters up on a two by four gave us room to include R30 insulation underneath most of the roof area.*

Bradley planned to keep the weight of our new roof down by framing it with two by fours, but I wanted at least nine inches of space between the old and new roofs so I could insert R30 insulation. In the end, we compromised on eight inches at the lowest end (3.5 inches for each two by four plus 1 inch for the furring strip). Compressing the insulation at the



very edge of the roof will make it less effective, but since the roof rises as it moves toward the center of the trailer, only the outer rim will be affected.

Rather than attaching the insulation to the undersides of the rafters, we treated the space between our two roofs as an attic and laid the insulation flat on the old roof.



*On a shingled roof, you'd need a sheet of plywood on top of the rafters, but for a metal roof, you can simply run a few thin pieces of wood (furring strips) where the tin will be screwed down. (Bradley later cut energy-star appliances moving in a back the wood close to the chimney to provide adequate clearance.)*

Aside from these considerations, framing up our roof was similar to framing any other roof. Bradley first built the box that the rafters would sit on top of, then screwed the rafters in place, topping them off with furring strips onto which the roofing metal would attach.



*It's handy to have a station on the ground where you can cut all of the lumber to size before moving it up to the roof.*





*Although it's possible to put on a roof by yourself, it's easier to have both a ground man and a roof man. (Dogs are optional.)*

The metal itself had to be ordered from the factory a week in advance. We considered using the unglazed roofing panels available at Lowes and other hardware stores in eight and ten foot lengths, but that option would have required a lot more cutting and would have cost more than purchasing roofing directly from the factory. On the other hand, despite longevity claims by the manufacturers, I'm not confident that the glazed coating on housing tin makes up for its thinner metal—only time will tell which type of roofing panel lasts longer.



*Drilling a pilot hole on the ground makes tin much easier to attach, but be sure to measure the location of each furring strip so your screws will have something to bite into.*



*Roofing metal can be ordered in sheets of any size, but you'll sometimes need to cut a sheet or two in half to finish the ends of the roof.*





*Once the roof is framed up and the metal is prepared, it doesn't take long to screw the panels in place. Be sure to use special roofing screws with gaskets to prevent leaks.*

Bradley did 90% of the work, but my husband helped out to make the project go more smoothly. Overall, materials cost roughly \$1,970 in the summer of 2012 for the 500 square foot roof plus 200 square foot porch (decking not included), and we paid Bradley an additional \$850 for his labor. At \$4 per square foot (in our example), roofing definitely isn't a cheap project, but it's hard to put a price tag on not having to wake up in the night to empty buckets of water catching leaks in the hall. I'm also confident that the extra insulation will keep us warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer, making this project a good step in the direction of thermal efficiency.

## Simple convertible screen door

Aside from a small addition to house a wood stove (shown in the next chapter), the only other major renovation we've made to our trailer is a screen door. As several other trailer-annual energy bills isddwellers mentioned, mobile homes tend to require specialty parts since the doors and windows often aren't the same size as those in traditional houses. In addition, some small trailers (like ours) have doors opening out instead of in, which makes it tough to simply add a screen door to the outside. Bradley solved this problem by replacing our back door with a convertible screen door—breezy in the summer and warm in the winter.



*Two by twos, a bit of particle board, a few brackets and screws, and some screen formed the majority of the door.*

After removing the old door, Bradley measured the frame and built a rectangle out of two by twos, being careful to leave a bit of extra room

around the new door so it would swing freely. He made the bottom solid (with a cat door), while the top was coated with window screening.



*Styrofoam forms an insulative core in the solid part of the door.*

One sheet of styrofoam insulation was enough to insulate the bottom part of the door and also to create a removable piece that we can stuff behind the screen to close the door up in cold weather. A piece of particle board screwed across the screen on the outside finished the winter door so it leaks no more heat than our old arrangement did.

Although you can buy the parts separately, we had a screen-door spring set on hand from a yard sale, so we used it to complete the project. A latch, spring, and hinges allowed us to hang the door and close it tightly. Although a door like this isn't lockable, it otherwise fulfills all of the functions of a screen door and a solid door at a fraction of the cost.

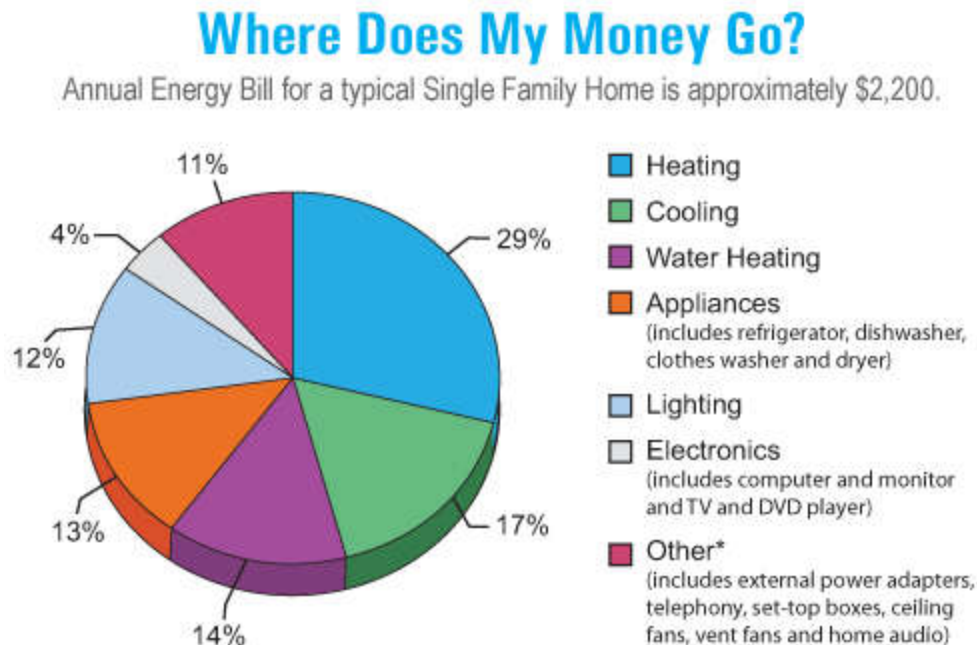
## Call for submissions

One of my favorite aspects of self-published ebooks is that each text can continue to be a work in progress, allowing me to add reader comments and ideas as they come to my attention. *Trailersteading* is even more of a work in progress than many of my other ebooks since I'm positive there are dozens of innovative trailer-dwelling homesteaders with tips to share about living happily in a small space, retrofitting trailers, and combining green building techniques with mobile homes. If you have a story that would fit in these virtual pages (or just found a typo in the existing ebook), please email [anna@kitenet.net](mailto:anna@kitenet.net). Thanks for sharing!



# Heating and cooling a mobile home

## Is energy use a trailer's Achilles' heel?



*Information on American energy use from  
[http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=products.pr\\_pie](http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=products.pr_pie).*

The government Energy Star website reports that the average American family spends \$2,200 per year on energy. Despite inherent inefficiencies in trailer design, all of the trailer dwellers interviewed for this book came in below average, with annual energy bills ranging from \$415 to \$2,049, clear proof that usage choices can make a huge difference in your energy consumption regardless of your ability to pay for insulation and energy-star appliances.

Trailer dwellers have to be especially vigilant to lower their energy bills, though, because the deck is stacked against them. Heating and cooling make up almost half of an American's average energy usage, and this is the spot where trailers tend to do worst. Thinly-insulated walls and roofs let in



the summer heat and winter cold quickly, and many trailer dwellers are afraid to install more sustainable heating options like wood stoves in their mobile home.

I've sprinkled energy-saving tips throughout this book, so if you're flipping around rather than reading straight through, you might want to start your education by reading the relevant sections elsewhere. The case study "Building a house for your trailer" presents one solution for insulating a trailer, while much of the "Remodeling a trailer" chapter pertains to more mainstream types of insulation and heat retention. This chapter takes up where those sections left off, with passive and energy-efficient heating and cooling choices that work as well (or better) in trailers as they do in houses.

# Low- and no-cost heating and cooling options



*Mikey and Wendy use lifestyle changes to keep their trailer cool in the summer.*

Since 18% to 20% of all heat lost from an average home comes out the windows and doors (with a similar amount of heat shining in during hot summer months), simple window coverings can make a big difference. Mikey (profiled in the "Cheap and green" case study) explained how he and his partner use window coverings to lower their summer cooling costs:

*"Each day by 2 pm, we shut out almost all the light from the south and west using two to three layers of curtains. This creates a dark environment which we can cool with a minuscule 300 watt swamp cooler. There are more tricks, like letting the cool morning air in and*

*closing all the windows by 9 am. The real win for us has been to block as much west light as possible. Around 7:30 pm (sundown), we remove all the layers of curtains, shut off the swamp and crack the windows."*



*David chose to buy quilted window blinds like the one above for his main living space. The quilted blinds (also known as "insulated Roman shades") run on a track and seal all around the window.*

You can use a similar technique to maintain interior heat in the winter. Remove coverings from south-facing windows during the day to let the sun's warmth stream in, then use homemade or storebought window coverings to prevent that heat from radiating back out through the erso windows at night. The photos above and below showcase a storebought and homemade option, both installed by David (profiled in the case study "An incognito trailer").



*This homemade window covering in the basement of David's house upgrades the R-value of his double-glazed window from R2 to R8 or R9.*

Screen doors and window fans are also effective at lowering indoor temperatures in the summer, using much less electricity than air conditioners do. Again, work with nature to make your efforts worthwhile, closing windows and blocking off screen doors during the height of summer days, then opening everything up and turning on the fans once the outside temperature has cooled down.

Finally, the cheapest way to stay warm in the winter and cool in the summer without breaking the bank is to change your tolerance levels. Wearing sweaters in the winter and short clothes in the summer gives you a wider range of comfortable room temperatures, and playing chicken with heating and cooling devices during the shoulder seasons will allow your body to adapt to warmer summer temperatures and colder winter temperatures. You may find yourself content with inside temperatures between 55 and 85 if you wait to turn on the hot and cold air in fall and spring. As an added bonus, some people believe that experiencing a wide range of room temperatures is good for your health and longevity.

# Passive-solar heating



*Although not a trailer, this house is a perfect example of passive-solar design. Most of the south side of the house consists of a bank of windows, and a grape arbor helps block summer sun.*

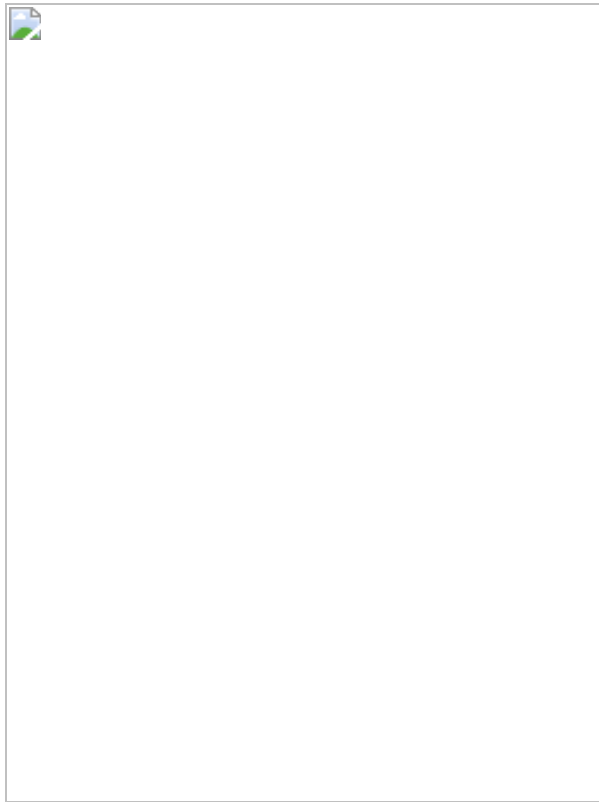
If you think I'm a bit nutty for suggesting adapting to such a wide range of temperatures, but you don't want to use too much energy to heat and cool your trailer, passive-solar tricks might be right up your alley. Put simply, passive solar heating refers to collecting the sun's warmth without using solar panels or other electrified devices.

You typically have to think further ahead to take advantage of the sun's energy passively, and you may need to spend a bit more money up front, but the long term rewards are striking. On sunny winter days, I let our wood stove go out between 11 am and 4 pm because the sun's energy is more than enough to keep our inside space warm...and I only planned our trailer to



take advantage of about a third of the passive solar gain it could have netted. If you've got a bit more money to put into a passive solar system, the sun could provide most of your winter heat.

Despite their lack of insulation, single-wide trailers have one thing going for them in the heat department—they are perfectly shaped to take advantage of the energy of the sun. Often, a passive-solar building is designed to be long and skinny, with a panel of windows lining the extensive south side and with few or no windows on the north side. A carefully calibrated roof overhang ensures that the summer sun doesn't make it into the south-facing windows, but that the lower winter sun does shine inside.



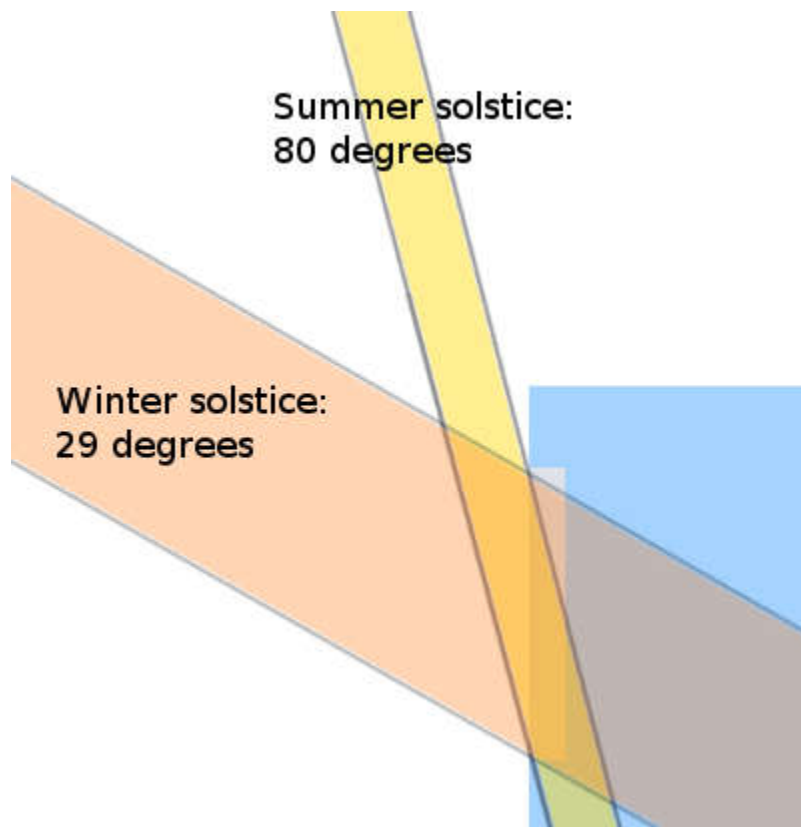
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*We chose to use two by fours to frame up our windows rather than the two by twos that originally formed the wall. The wider lumber allowed us to include more insulation.*

Adding windows to the south side of a mobile home is remarkably easy. If your trailer is like ours, just unscrew the metal siding on the outside and

remove the wooden interior face for the same area on the inside. Locate any electrical wiring and carefully move it out of the way (turning off the relevant breaker at the same time), then pull out the insulation and remove the wooden studs. You can use the same wood to frame back up around your new windows and the same inner and outer skins to seal the wall closed, although I recommend fresh insulation inside the renovated wall.

The only other factor to consider is sturdiness of the new wall—narrow windows allow you to replace all of the studs that support the roof, or you can use more complicated framing techniques to keep the wall structurally sound with wider windows.

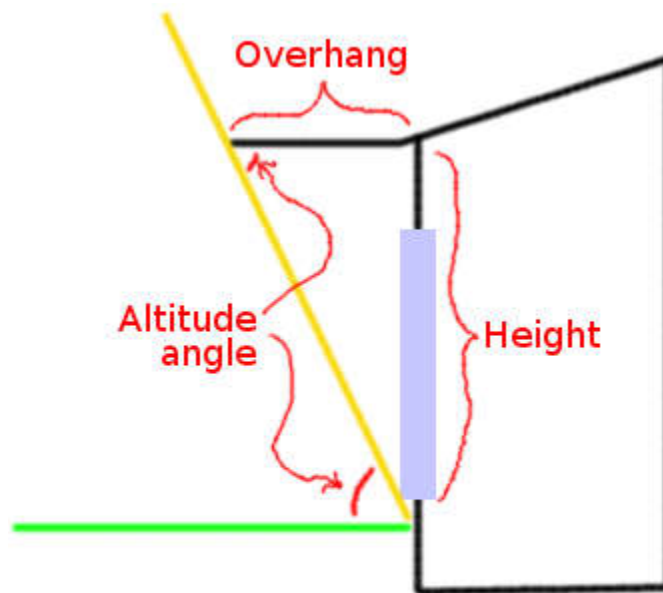


*At 37 degrees north of the equator, the sun's angle is vastly different in the winter and summer. Your latitude will determine your sun angle.*

The next step is to make sure you block the summer sun so you don't bake during the warm months. In the long term, a deciduous shade tree planted in front of the south face of your trailer (or in front of the north face if you live in the southern hemisphere) is the optimal choice since the tree will be leafless during the winter, and will not only block summer sun from

entering the windows, but will also shade your roof. In the short term, though, you'll want to either erect a trellis lined with fast-growing plants, build shutters or wooden blinds for the outside, or install a roof overhang just the right width to let in winter sun but shut out energy from the higher summer sun.

When planning a permanent awning or roof overhang, first decide during which part of the year you want to have sun striking your windows. Many passive-solar engineers use the time between the fall and spring equinoxes as a basic rule of thumb, but you'll want to shorten that time if you live in a very warm area and lengthen it if you live in a very cold area. Next, use the calculator at <http://susdesign.com/sunangle/> to determine the angle of your sun at the that cutoff date—at our latitude, the sun altitude angle is 52.75 degrees at noon on March 21. Now measure the vertical distance between the bottom of the roof overhang and the bottom of the window (five feet in our case) and use some basic geometry to determine the length of your overhang.



$$\text{Overhang} = \frac{\text{Height}}{\tan (\text{Altitude angle})}$$

*Calculating the length of your overhang requires a bit of basic geometry. If you plug in inches for your height, you'll end up with inches for your overhang; if you insert feet, you'll get feet.*

In the case of my example, my overhang should be 46 inches long if I want to totally shade my window between the two equinoxes. A smaller overhang will give me shade during a shorter proportion of the year while a wider overhang will give me shade for longer.

The final feature of a well-designed passive-solar system is some sort of thermal mass inside the trailer to capture the energy from the winter sun and radiate that warmth back out into the room at night. We haven't installed anything yet, but plan to eventually tile the floor in front of our bank of windows as a heat battery. Other materials with a high thermal mass include concrete, brick, clay, and containers of water, all of which will help mitigate hot summer days as well as cold winter nights.

Despite the slightly scary math, the actual renovations necessary to convert a trailer to passive solar can be well within the range of the DIYer as long as you plan the trailer's orientation properly during installation. As an added bonus, you'll notice the windows light the interior of your trailer with no need for electric lamps between dawn and dusk—yet more energy savings!

# Wood heat

## Playing with fire



*Don't forget to sift the charcoal out of your wood ashes and use the former on the garden. Read more about biochar in Weekend Homesteader: October.*

Installing a wood stove in a mobile home may seem like playing with fire, but the truth is that any heating option can burn your house down. If you choose an energy-efficient wood stove and harvest the firewood sustainably, wood heat can be an economical and environmentally-friendly option, and careful installation of the stove will ensure that it is no less safe than a wood stove in a stick-built home.

## Exterior furnace





*Our first foray into wood heat was an exterior furnace, which was arguably safer than an interior wood stove, but was definitely less efficient.*

When we first, tentatively dipped our toes into the concept of wood heat, we began with an exterior wood furnace. I can't really recommend this option, but thought I'd throw the idea out there so that others can learn from our mistakes. On the plus side, we learned a lot about wood heat and the stove lowered our electric bill enough to pay for itself in the first year, but the disadvantages were many.



*The color of the smoke coming out of your chimney is an indicator of a wood stove's efficiency. Darker smoke means a less efficient fire and more air pollution.*

As the name suggests, an exterior furnace keeps the fire safely outside your home, then you pipe the heat into the house using water lines or (in our case) air ducts. The trouble is that you also lose a lot of heat to the outdoors, and none of the furnace options I've seen are very energy efficient to begin with, so you end up burning a lot of wood. The \$200 furnace we found on ebay was also a bear to start and churned out sooty smoke. As a final mark against exterior wood furnaces, you have to run a fan or pump to get heat from your furnace into the house, meaning that your wood stove does little good during power-outage situations. After ten days without power one snowy winter, we decided to shift gears.

### **Mobile-home wood-stove requirements**



*Heating with wood is possible inside a mobile home, and it helps you take another step toward independence.eating and cooling. '*

We still liked the idea of wood heat, so we were thrilled when a bit of research determined that it's quite possible to install a wood stove inside a mobile home. The differences between mobile-home and traditional-home installation come down to six main requirements for the former:

A close-clearance (double-walled) pipe must be used to connect the stove to the chimney.

Spark arresters are installed in the chimney cap.

The stove should be grounded to the home chassis.

The stove must have tiedowns to attach it to the floor so it won't shift around when the trailer is moved. (Presumably, this is only relevant if your trailer is less than forty years old and will actually be moved again.)

The stove should use exterior air for combustion.

Wood stoves are not permissible in mobile-home bedrooms.

(As usual, it's best to check your local building codes to make sure there are no local additions or changes to the above list.)



*Small stoves are a good fit in a mobile home. Although expensive, we feel like our Jotul F 602 was worth the price tag—we now use a fraction of the wood the exterior furnace consumed.*

Another factor to consider is choosing a wood stove that's approved for use in a mobile home. In general, these stoves are on the small to medium side, have a top-exiting flue collar (meaning the stove pipe comes out the top rather than the back), and include a heat shield on the back. These characteristics combine to make the clearance around all sides of the stove less, which in turn lets them fit into a mobile home. In fact, I learned that the small size of mobile homes is really the biggest danger feature, so your goal should be to find a spot for your wood stove where you can provide plenty of air space around it. The model you choose will list the minimum clearance requirements on each side—plan to attain or exceed them.



*An efficient wood stove saves money and prevents pollution. As you can see, the smoke coming out of our chimney is perfectly clear as long as the wood is dry.*

Small stoves simply make sense in a small home anyway since you get the most heat and the least pollution per piece of firewood if you don't damp your stove down and instead let each piece of wood burn fast and hot. Although it's only a rough guide, many sources suggest planning on 50 to 55 BTU of stove output per square foot of living area in the extreme north



of the U.S., 30 to 35 BTU per square foot in the Deep South, and around 40 to 45 BTU per square foot in the middle of the country. Using those guidelines, our 500-square-foot trailer requires a wood stove rated at 2,000 to 2,250 BTU—your trailer may need a little bit more or less output.

### Installing a wood stove



*Adding a small alcove to our trailer made it easy to ensure our stove had plenty of clearance.*

Since our trailer is so small, we opted to begin our wood-stove adventure by building on a small alcove to house the stove, planning the size around the minimum clearances with use of heat shields. If we ever planned to move our trailer, the alcove would obviously be a bad idea, but it was a cheap and relatively easy option for keeping the wood stove out of the main traffic flow of our house, and for ensuring that only nonflammable materials came

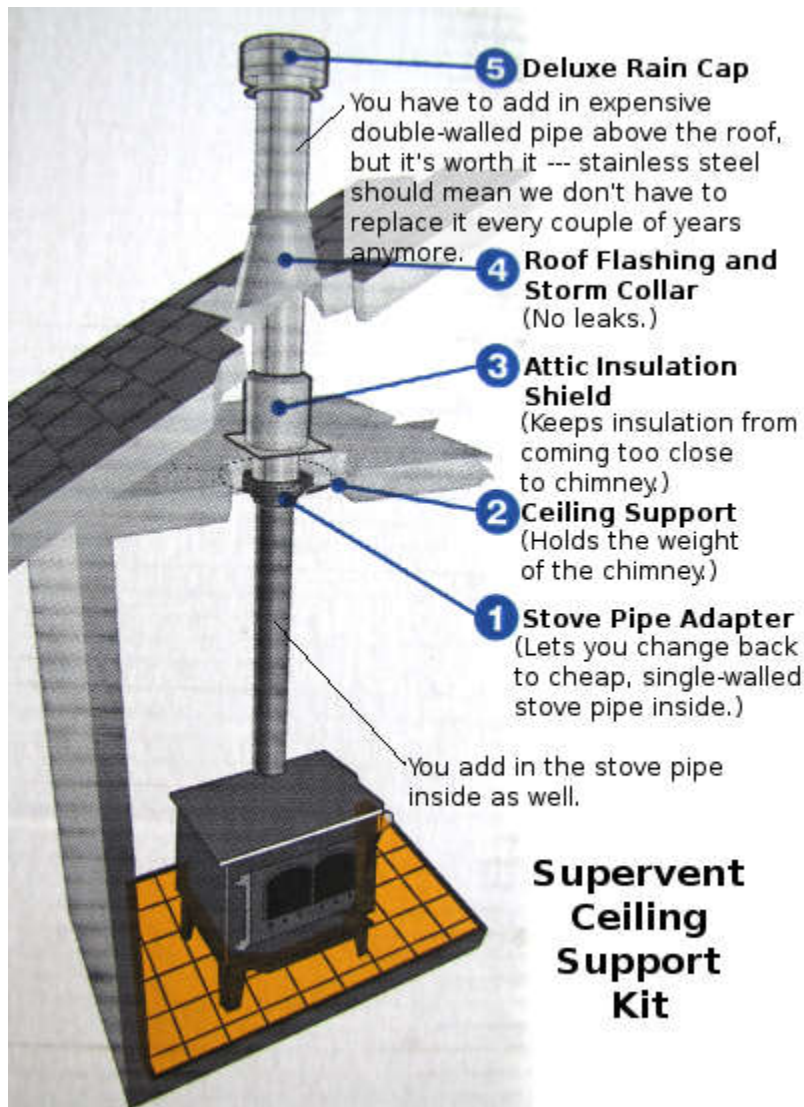
close to the fire hazard.



*We used old roofing metal spaced an inch away from the wall for heat shields.*

If you're cramped for space (and in most mobile homes you will be), heat shields are a helpful way of lowering your safe clearance distances. (Your wood stove will usually list minimum clearances with and without heat shields.) Although you can buy expensive heat shields at the wood-stove store, a heat shield is really just a piece of metal with plenty of room for air to flow behind it. Noncombustible spacers hold the metal an inch away from the wall and hot air flows in behind the metal from down at the floor,

past the stove, and out the top. The result is that the wall behind the heat shield never gets hot enough to catch on fire, although the heat shields will feel quite warm to the touch.



*A ceiling support kit, available for around \$300 or less from a store like Lowes, will expedite wood-stove installation.*





*Putting a ceiling support kit into a new addition makes installation even easier since you can build around the parts you have rather than trying to make the parts fit between existing rafters.*



*Although expensive, stainless-steel, double-walled chimney pipe is a good safety feature. As a bonus, the metal won't rot out in a year or two like single-walled stove pipe often does in wet climates.*





*Be sure to pick up a tube of high-temperature caulk to prevent rain from seeping down your chimney pipe.*

After planning the clearances, we needed to consider how we'd attach the chimney to the roof of the alcove. Starting with a ceiling support kit (plus extra pieces of stove pipe—total cost \$261 in 2010) makes this part of the project feasible for a moderately skilled DIYer. You can cut costs (although lowering safety margins) if you cobble together the pieces yourself; conversely, you'll spend a lot more on the chimney components if you buy them from the wood-stove store.



*Your stove will come with minimum clearances in each direction for the nonflammable hearth as well. Typically, you need to allow a bit more room in front since sparks can fly out the wood stove's door.*

With the ceiling support kit and chimney in place, it's time to move on to the floor protection. A piece of nonflammable board topped by inexpensive ceramic tiles will prevent the stove from overheating the materials beneath it, and will ensure that flying sparks don't catch your trailer on fire. Our floor covering cost about \$25.



*Our energy-efficient wood stove is the best investment we've made in increasing our comfort levels.*

We opted to jack our stove up onto solid cinderblocks rather than cutting a piece of stove pipe to just the right height to slide in between the ceiling

support kit and the stove collar. No matter how you install your stove, be sure to lift with your legs not your back—even tiny wood stoves are heavy!

If you bought a brand new stove, try to install it during warm weather so you can light it the first few times with all the windows open. Stoves are usually treated with a substance that causes a foul odor when it first reaches high heat. Similarly, be sure to read the instructions carefully—our manufacturer recommended that we start with a few small and medium fires before heating the stove to full roar, and the booklet also gave tips for the best way to light our individual model.

If we could go back in time and make one addition to our trailer earlier than we made it in real life, the wood stove would be on the top of the list (followed by a shady porch on the north side for summer dining). Assuming you live in a cold winter area, I highly recommend an efficient wood stove for lower energy use and winter basking.



# Case study: "A crazy, cobbled-together, split-level mobile home"

**A small home for a large family**



*A pavilion-style roof protects two joined trailers.*

Lindsey and her husband Keith live in a "crazy, cobbled-together, split-level mobile home" in northeast Alabama with their five children. "We also have another baby due in February 2013, and we hope to have several more before my child-bearing days are over," Lindsey added. At 1,680 square feet, personal space in their two-trailer combo clocks in below the average size of even a 1950s-era home, but they find that the advantages of trailer life outweigh the disadvantages.





*Lindsey and Keith's family in 2010.*  
a fraction of the cost.

leliving in a  
"We moved from western Washington state to Georgia in 2002 with our 7-month-old firstborn, hoping to find a place where we could live on one income and buy some land," said Lindsey. "Being willing to live in a trailer certainly enables us to live the way we do, on one income with Mom homeschooling the kids. That was our priority and we were willing to do just about anything to achieve that."

### **Cobbling together a trailer combo**



*The two trailers are joined by a connecting stairway, cut during Christmas eve 2011. "It was a great gift!" Lindsey recalled.*

"When we found a real estate ad for 11 acres with a 'house' for \$40,000 we immediately made an appointment to see it," Lindsey remembered. The house turned out to be a 10-by-40 foot trailer from the early 1960s with a "poorly-built addition of about the same size," which they later tore down.

"Our plan was to live in the trailer/addition combo for 5 to 10 years while saving money to build a more suitable house," Lindsey said. "There was always a sort of 'ew, a trailer' attitude between us, although we didn't look down on other folks who lived in them. We just figured we'd need something sturdier and bigger for the family we were hoping to grow."

But the trailer slowly won the family over. "The little trailer had a really good design that took advantage of every bit of available space in a relatively attractive way," Lindsey explained. "Well, we liked it anyway. And my husband always admired how well-designed things were for such a small space."



*You can see both trailers in this photo, taken during the construction of the roof. "The smaller trailer is almost centered on the larger one lengthwise, so there's about the same amount of offset at the other end," Lindsey explained.*

Perhaps because of the positive aspects of the original trailer, the couple opted to increase their living area by adding a second trailer, purchased for \$7,500 and moved and installed for another \$3,000. "Our second trailer is a 1998 model 16x80. It's not as well planned as the older trailer. I think it tries too hard not to look like a trailer."



*The roof allowed room for an extensive covered porch, which is still under construction.*

With the two trailers butting up against each other, the obvious next step was to turn them into a single structure with a joined roof. "The roof is pretty colossal and ended up costing a lot more time, money, and effort than we initially imagined," Lindsey said, adding that the final price tag for the roof alone was close to \$9,500. "So we probably could have purchased a place with a more typical home to spend more time or even spent, but we wouldn't have the space we have now, we wouldn't have a unique home (which we like!), and we would still be in debt instead of having spent the money when we had it, a little (and sometimes a lot) at a time."

### **Kids in a trailer**



*Lindsey's daughter, then four years old, standing in a hole dug for one of the roof supports.*

"We homeschool our children, so six of us are home pretty much all day long, five or six days per week. That means that our house takes more abuse than most folks', just because everything gets used so much more often. We've replaced our stove twice and repaired our fridge at least three times. The toilet gets flushed and the doors get opened (but seldom closed) much more often."

When asked about the disadvantages of trailer life, Lindsey pointed to the tendency of their home to break at inopportune moments, along with the lack of resale value. But she added the caveat: "We don't have plans to leave our place, so that isn't really an issue for us."





*The four oldest children sleep in bunk beds built into what used to be the closets.*

Lack of space was more of a problem before adding the larger trailer, so the pair buried a 10-by-40-foot shipping container in the yard for storage. "The shipping container helped me keep my sanity," Lindsey recalled. "Now it serves as a tornado shelter as well as a food storage space and a place to keep out-of-season or outgrown clothes and child-related equipment." Lindsey plans to use the shipping container as a root cellar as well, since being sunk in the ground "gives it a little extra cool factor."

## Unconventional heating and cooling



*"This is the connecting opening from the top side (larger trailer)," Lindsey said. "Just beyond the red lampshade in the background is where we have the wood stove. We keep a fan hanging from the ceiling in this opening (the space is at least 4 feet wide) to keep warm air circulating."*

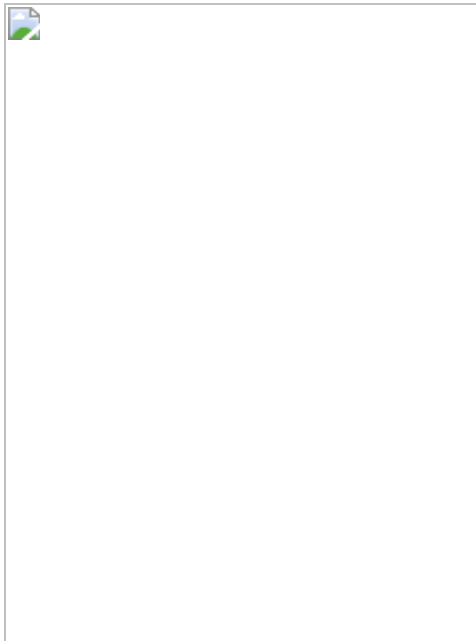
In northern Alabama, winters can be chilly and summers are scorching, so both heating and cooling are an issue. The family averages about \$150 per month on electricity, which includes running two window air-conditioners for six to eight weeks in the summer. An additional \$150 per year provides propane for cooking, and "hubby and the boys cut, haul, split, and stack our firewood, so there's no real cost there except oil, gas, and new chains," Lindsey said. "Our energy costs are still quite manageable, and since we don't have a mortgage any longer, it's definitely cost effective for us to live in a less energy-efficient home."

*"We do a lot of drying laundry outdoors, but we go through seasons (especially with a new baby and only little kids to 'help') of using our dryer more than we'd like, and we pay for that," Lindsey said about her electricity use. "Now that I have two who are more capable of helping in that area, we don't use [the dryer] nearly as much."*

Although Lindsey's trailers are not as well-insulated as their neighbors' stick-built houses, the unique roof (and nearby trees) do a great job deflecting summer heat. "Our pavilion-style roof makes it a lot cooler in

our house than it would be with a conventional roof," Lindsey said. "We have friends with a trailer almost identical to our newer one. They have zero trees and the original roof and they spend a fortune on cooling it all summer long—for 4 or 5 months—because it just doesn't keep its cool like ours does."

## Closing thoughts



*Lindsey working on a temporary porch outside the front door.*

I was fascinated by the way Lindsey's attitude toward her trailer changed over the years. "It's been a while in coming but I think we all like our home," she said. "It's different, more than a little counter-cultural, so to speak, and that's how we like to roll."

"Most people hear about our house and look like they want to move a few feet further away from me, but once they see it or hear more about it they tend to think it's actually kind of cool, if not something they'd ever choose for themselves." She concluded: "A few years before we finished paying off our land, we realized that we're actually not 'too good' to live in a trailer, possibly forever."



# **Beyond the trailer**

The Modern Simplicity series, of which this book is the second volume, suggests ways to incorporate appropriate technology into your life so you have time to pursue your passions. After six years of trailer-dwelling, my husband and I are convinced that an old mobile home can be a stepping stone in your path toward voluntary simplicity, but there's obviously much more to the process than streamlining your housing situation. Simple living only works if you fill the gap left behind by consumer culture with people and projects you love, and if you remember to enjoy the journey. Follow your bliss, and you'll be halfway there!



# Acknowledgments

Like all of my books, this one grew out of conversations with readers of our blog and with family and friends. I'm especially indebted to the trailer dwellers who opened their lives to my nosy questions, and to Bradley who didn't mind me hanging over his shoulder with a camera all summer. Long-time-blog-the lack of t aroundreader Roland and world's-greatest-mother Adrienne were invaluable in the editing stages (although all remaining errors are obviously mine). My husband came up with the idea of living in a trailer and also taught me that living simply is not only ethically sound, it's also a fun and inspiring adventure. Last, but certainly not least, I'm eternally grateful to kind readers who leave reviews on Amazon, tell their friends about my books, and share their enthusiasm—you are why I write.

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